

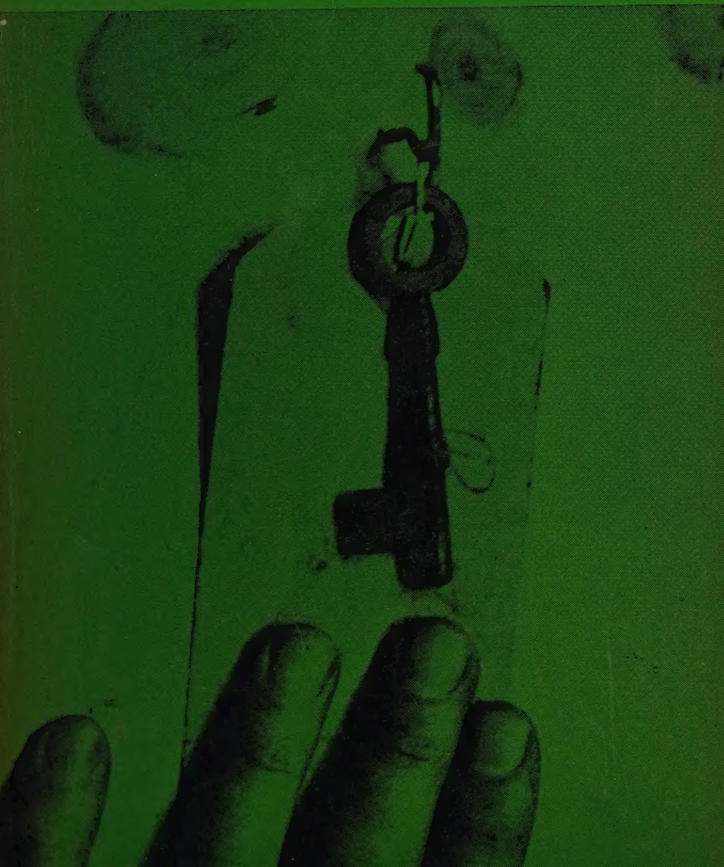


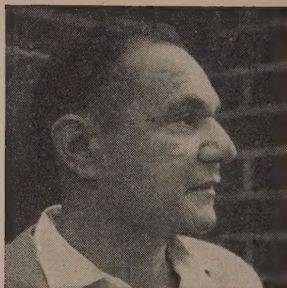
Penguin Crime

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The key to Nicholas Street

Stanley Ellin





Stanley Ellin, who was born in New York City, graduated from college in 1936, and has since been a 'pusher' for a newspaper distributor, a farmer, a teacher, and an iron worker. During World War II he was in the U.S. Army. When he started to write, his first story won an award from the *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* and further stories won similar awards. These were published together as *Mystery Stories*, which was selected in 1958 as one of the 100 most important books of the year and presented to the White House Library.

His other full-length books include *Dreadful Summit*, *The Eighth Circle*, and *The Winter After This Summer*. In 1955 he received an 'Edgar' Award from the Mystery Writers of America.

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PENGUIN BOOKS

1694

THE KEY TO NICHOLAS STREET

STANLEY ELLIN



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NICHOLAS STREET

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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TO JANIE AND SUSAN

PART ONE · *Junie*

CHAPTER 1

WHEN I woke up I could tell just from the feel of things that it was a beautiful Sunday. It was warm, but there was a breeze coming from the river, and every time it made the window shade twist and flap you could see the sunshine running around the walls bright enough to hurt. And there were church bells all over. From Jackson Avenue, and from Five Corners, and even from downtown where St Alonsus was using its new set that had cost me about three hundred bingo cards and never a winner.

Across the street Mr Bennauer was already pushing his lawn mower around, and probably stopping to work on the corners with a manicure scissors. They are a great bunch of worriers about their lawns on Nicholas Street, and Mr Bennauer is the worst of the lot, although lately it came to me that he was always taking his biggest interest in the lawn the same time I got up in the morning to take a couple of breaths of air at the window.

I had never used a nightgown in the hot weather, what with my attic room being so stuffy, and when I used to pull the shade up and lean out of the window Mr Bennauer would always seem to slow down on the lawn and put the beady eye on me. For a while I hadn't given it a thought because he wore such thick glasses you wouldn't figure he could see his own ten fingers in front of his nose, but then when I passed him on the street he had started to give me the kind of silly smile that would ring a gong in any smart girl's mind, and I had caught on.

Of course, it wasn't my place to just walk up to him and tell him right out to quit acting like an old goat, so I did what I thought was the smart thing. I told Mrs A about it.

Well, from the way she talked to me you'd wonder who was getting out of line, Mr Bennauer or me!

‘Do you mean to say, Junie,’ she asked, ‘that you sleep – that when you go to bed you don’t even put on a nightgown?’

I tried to explain in my nicest way that even if the attic room was bigger than the kitchen oven it certainly wasn’t much cooler once the summer got under way. But I could tell right off that I wasn’t making my point. There’s a sort of look she gets at times like that, very sweet and interested, but all it means is that your words are bouncing right back at you. You talk, and it looks like she’s listening, but she really isn’t. I suppose what she’s really doing is marking time until you close your mouth and let her explain things her own way. And the funny thing is that she has such a nice way of doing all this that you don’t even feel you have the right to get peeved about it.

‘You see, Junie,’ she said, ‘the last thing in the world I’d want to do is hurt your feelings, but what you’ve been doing is really a disgusting habit, isn’t it, dear? And, of course, you’re not going to do it any more. If you need a nightgown . . .’

‘I have a nightgown,’ I said. ‘I have a couple of nightgowns.’

‘Then there’s no problem at all, is there? It’s just one of those little things your mother should have told you, but must have forgotten. And I’m sure she’d be happy to know that someone did take the trouble to explain to you about it.’

As if Mrs A and I both didn’t know that the only thing that made my mother happy was all the beer she could hold and a large-sized glass to save her the trouble of having to pour too often.

It’s funny how many people there are in the world that you should like more than you do. Here was Mrs A always being so kind and considerate and thoughtful in her own way, and yet I sometimes found myself wondering. I even wondered if Mr A’s going in and out of the attic storeroom now and then

wasn't what had set her off so hard on the nightgown business. If that was what she thought she should have known me better.

Some of the other Five Corners girls I know who went in for housework tell me they'd rather have the husband around than the wife any day of the week. In my opinion this is talk from females with only one idea in mind: when wife's away hubby will play – and pay and pay. I am not the narrow-minded type myself. At age nineteen I have learned that it takes all kinds of people to make a world, and that at least fifty per cent of them are men itching to play with anything in skirts that comes walking by. And if a girl wants to play it that way, good luck to her, I say.

But I personally didn't want it that way, and I must say for Mr A that he did not make it any great strain for a girl to stay on the straight and narrow around him. Of course, it could be that when a man gets to age forty-seven the machine tends to run down somewhat, but, still and all, when such as Clark G or Humphrey B turns up in the latest picture at the Orpheum it would seem to be otherwise. There you have a pair of males who look as if they will stand up and be counted among the men even when the wheel chair is rolled around for them, and if it happens to be me who is elected to push that wheel chair around, well and good, say I.

Whatever the reason, one thing was clear. Mrs A might be willing to stand in as mother to little Junie, but Mr A was certainly never going to play anything more than grandfather. And whether he inherited it from Mr A or figured it out all by himself, young Richard also made it easy to steer around the birds and bees issue in 161 Nicholas Street.

The first few days I was in 161 I couldn't quite figure out the boy. Here was something that looked as if it could have been posing on a magazine cover for an all-American something or other, but whatever topic of the day you would figure might be of interest, such as the latest at the Orpheum

or the Yanks' chances of taking the pennant, just rang up No Sale.

It took me a little while to put the picture together and realize that Dick could become practically gossipy about Beethoven's number umpteen, or the latest in long-haired literature, but as far as just plain living was concerned the boy was strictly out on his feet. But *out*.

To give him all the credit that's coming to him he did volunteer to help me wash the dinner dishes the first few days I was at the house, and I can't say he was revolted at having to reach around me every time he wanted to take a dish from the drying rack. But evidently I wasn't able to supply that little something that Beethoven could give him, and after those few days dish-washing was strictly a solo performance. Which, of course, was all right too, considering that Bob might walk in the kitchen door any time, and if he caught the Prince reaching around me a little too close there would be more than broken dishes to worry about. Bob Macek, I should note here, is a young man who hates to waste a moment of his young life, and besides slicing steaks at Sharf's butcher shop during the week and pitching some very good ball for Sutton on week-ends, likes to make a full-time job of Jealousy, which, so long as I am the party involved, is quite all right with me.

If young Richard had any other interest in life besides the Arts with a capital A it was Mrs A herself, and the same can be said about his sister, Bettina. As I once told Mrs A, when the time comes that Bob and I can just settle back on the front porch and look around at our life's work and find that we have turned out a pair of kids who think as much of us as Dick and Bettina think of their mama, well, we can tell ourselves we've done a good job all around. And, said I, teasing her a little, if there was any trick to it would she please come across now and Tell All. It might save a lot of heartburn later on.

‘If you really love your children, Junie,’ said she, ‘you’ll find yourself getting it back with interest.’ All that it needed, the way she said it, was some organ music in the background, but I think she really meant it.

Anyhow, adding up the A’s, Mr and Mrs, Dick and Bettina, your total would be just about the most solid family in Sutton. And why an outfit like this should be afflicted with someone like Mr Matthew Chaves is something calculated to make a liar out of the one who thought up that line about Justice Triumphs.

Bettina, of course, was most to blame because she was the one who brought him into the house, but, knowing the Chaves as I learned to, I would say it was just as likely he looked around, liked what he saw, and walked in himself. He had that way about him, and, more than that, he could make you think you actually did invite him in and were now elected to cater to him.

To show you what I mean, the first look I ever had of him I thought, well, here’s another case looking for a handout, and what he’s doing using the front door, I don’t know.

He needed a shave, and he was dressed – to use the word loosely – in old slacks and a tee-shirt that was torn on one shoulder, and he was wearing a pair of moccasins so worn-out and tired-looking that you could have rolled them up and put them away in your pocket. And, of course, he had that cigarette dangling in the corner of his mouth. He must take showers with that cigarette in his mouth.

I will admit that what was in the clothes looked a lot better than the clothes themselves, if you were willing to take a second look. That black curly hair and those grey eyes were a combination any girl would give her eyeteeth for, and although he wasn’t too big he did look like something that a thoughtful character would rather walk around than try to push off the sidewalk.

But he had that way about him that was calculated to pull

a file across your teeth at first sight. The way he stood there as if he had enough money in his pocket to buy the house and was wondering whether it was worth it or not, and the way he squinted at me through the cigarette smoke when Bettina called me in. It wasn't as if there was anything in that look to make me blush if I were the blushing kind, which, thank God, I am not, but I can say that meeting his eye gave me the kind of feeling a microbe must get when the professor peeks at it through the microscope. You could just see that eye squinting at you, and behind it, nothing. Blank. A stone wall.

And the way Bettina was looking at this character was a picture in itself. Here was a girl who, despite being twenty-two and one of the nicer-looking teachers in the local school, strapped herself into a girdle a size too small, used lipstick so carefully that she might as well have saved herself the trouble, and told me the week before that she didn't believe any girl should neck with a man until she was engaged to him. And here she was looking at this beachcomber like something fourteen years old waiting for the latest swoon-sensation to come out of the stage door!

Mister, I thought, you may not know it, but either you are now engaged right up to your ears, or you are giving a certain school teacher a whole new set of ideas to work on.

'June,' said the Princess, and how easy it was to see that she was struggling to stay on an even keel, 'this is Mr Chaves.' Pronouncing it Shah-vez.

'I'm pleased to meet you, sir,' said I, playing Little Junie, the Perfect Domestic, and wondering what this was all about.

'Mr Chaves', put in the Princess, 'was supposed to be visiting Miss Ballou next door, but as it turned out she wasn't home, so I told him he was perfectly welcome here. You *could* find something for him to eat, couldn't you, Junie?' she asked in a voice that said if I couldn't there would be a certain school teacher listed under the suicides tomorrow.

So, it was a handout after all, though not quite the usual kind. But what really had me puzzled was the picture of this Chaves boy *visiting* the Ballou. I could see him coming to dig up her garden maybe, but Bettina had come down hard on the 'visiting', which meant things were on a social level. And if the picture of Bettina playing hostess to the Monster looked strange, the picture of the Ballou doing ditto could give it cards and spades.

Actually, my only feelings about the Ballou were admiration, because there, say I, was what any girl would dream of looking like when she reaches the years of discretion. When you can take the female form and wrap it in a tweed suit that doesn't do any more for it than a burlap bag would, and stick its feet in a pair of five-pound brogues, and still have it bring the Nicholas Street wolves to attention like a bugle call you must have something to work with. Which the Ballou had from the brogues right up to that gorgeous red hair.

Of course, the Ballou was strictly city material, which is always an asset since there is something that New York City can give a woman that even Fillmore Street in Sutton can't offer. She did art work for half those big magazines you see on the news-stand, and just how much she got from it you can judge by the fact that when she was shopping for a place in Sutton and decided that 159 Nicholas was just the thing she paid cash down for it on the spot!

That, and some other little items like a ranch mink that is worth laying your life down for, a Cadillac convertible with everything in it but the kitchen sink, and the small fortune she paid me for an occasional cleaning of the house and to keep tabs on her water heater and stove was enough to show that all this stuff about artists in garrets was now definitely a thing of the past. Or, if it wasn't, the Ballou had her own private radium mine tucked away somewhere, and just wasn't telling.

Anyhow, knowing the Ballou, what would any smart girl think if something showed up in yesterday's whiskers and a torn shirt claiming to be a guest of the lady, and since he had not found her home, offering himself for adoption to the first bidder? First bidder in this case being Bettina herself, a girl who had somehow gotten to age twenty-two thinking that when a strange man offered a lollipop to a little girl it was because he wanted to make sure her system had plenty of nourishing sugar in it.

Well, that is what I thought, and that is what I told Bettina as soon as I could get her off into the kitchen away from the Chaves.

'And', I told her, 'I want to make it clear right now that if there is anything missing from the house when Prince Charming has gone *you* are going to do all the explaining to your mother and father.'

Her face went absolutely white. 'Junie,' she said, 'how you could even think such a thing . . . !'

I told her how I could. And why.

She looked at me pityingly. 'As it happens,' she said, 'Mr Chaves works for one of the magazines that Miss Ballou sells her pictures to, and they are very close friends. She told him to visit her any week end, and that is exactly what he is doing here. And if he chooses to dress in old clothes, that's *his* business.'

I told her that even if he were dressed up in the best suit you could buy in Hibbard's on Fillmore Street there was something about him – something about those looks and that expression . . .

Her lips tightened so that for a second she looked all school teacher. 'I happen to find him an unusually attractive young man,' she said, 'and as far as judging someone from his looks and his expression I might say that I've seen Bob Macek at times when he looked positively villainous!' And with that she walked out of the kitchen quick before I could

tell her that I wasn't going to marry Bob for his beauty, which is something she knew anyhow.

As it turned out, of course, she was part right, and I was part right. Bettina's part was that the Chaves was everything he claimed to be, and my part was that he was a lot more than that. He had that mean streak in him, and he had Bettina so dizzy that he could get away with it, too. And, naturally, he could get away with it with Mr and Mrs A because they would rather have dropped dead than done something to make Bettina unhappy.

I was dying to talk to the Ballou about him because, from the way he was at home with her, she probably could have told plenty. But after all, one doesn't just walk up to a woman and ask personal questions about some man she knows, especially when one has no idea of how things stand between said man and said woman. The fact that the Chaves took to coming up week ends regularly and would spend part of his time with the Ballou and part with Bettina as if he hated to deprive either of them of his royal presence didn't seem to bother the Ballou, at least not on the outside. But then, you can't even tell that way, and certainly not with the Ballou, who didn't even blink an eye when I happened to rip one of the pictures she had all ready for some magazine, and she had to do it all over again.

The way I finally figured it out – and Bob admitted it made sense – was that the Chaves was making a big play for the Ballou, couldn't get to first base, and found Bettina was a handy way to cook up some red-headed jealousy. As I told Bob, Bettina was a very nice girl in many ways, but she could never be any real competition for the Ballou. A man who has worked himself into the spot where he can use one of the Ballou's Beautyrests on demand is a man who might think Bettina was as much fun to be with as a two months old puppy, but that would be as far as it went.

And then, of course, trust the Chaves to really tangle

things up as on the day he announced he had given up his job in New York and was settling down in Sutton. He said it at the dinner table and while I almost dropped the meat platter I was bringing in at the moment I had to give Mr and Mrs A credit for taking it like a pair of troupers. They both managed to smile as though this was the nicest news that could have come to them, and Mrs A managed to ask him what his prospects were in town. Did he have a job in line, or what?

'I have,' said the Chaves sweetly. 'I've made arrangements to start to work tomorrow as an employee of the Sutton Ferry Corporation.'

'Doing what?' asked Mr A.

'Deck handing,' said the Chaves, 'on the good ship *Hudson Valley*. At thirty two fifty a week, and keep.'

From Bettina's reaction it was easy to see that Miss Innocence had known the score all along and was just waiting for one of the family to open up so that she could jump down his (or her) throat. But Dick kept on eating as if he hadn't heard a word, and Mr and Mrs A sat there as if the table in front of them had suddenly disappeared with the dinner and all on it.

'You mean', Mrs A finally said, 'that you gave up a job that paid you ten thousand a year to become a deck-hand on the ferry here?'

He meant it all right. And it also meant that instead of having to play week-end performances at 159 and 161 he could become a permanent boarder there. And did, or so close to it that you could hardly tell the difference.

When I told the big deal to Bob he knew right off that something serious must have happened in New York and that the Monster had been let out of his job there, but hard.

'And', said Bob, 'whatever happened there he's washed up in that line. So he'll take whatever handout comes along until he can marry Miss Ballou, and then he can settle down

and let her support him the way he figures he's entitled to.'

Bob had been making meat deliveries to the Ballou and gotten to know her pretty well, and I had a feeling that the prospects he had worked out for the Chaves did not strike him as very hard to take. I told him so.

'Well,' said my hero, 'there is a woman who would be very easy to take. Looks, brains, and money -- and she knows how to treat a man.'

It turned out that when he had mentioned to her that it tangled up his delivery schedule not to find her in, she had just up and given him a key to the side door of the house. 'If I don't answer the bell, just put the stuff in the freezer,' she said, and here was lover boy walking around with milady's key in his hip pocket!

That was when I made arrangements to take care of any deliveries to be made next door, whether or not anyone answered the bell. After all, this Macek boy may not be the only thing in pants worth looking at in Sutton, but he is going to do until something better comes along, which means, I might say, until death do us part.

CHAPTER 2

WHEN I pulled up the window shade sure enough there was Mr Bennauer across the street working away with the lawn mower, and either he has twenty-twenty vision behind those thick glasses or else he has a radar system built into the lawn mower, because as soon as I rested my hands on the sill and leaned out of the window he slowed up his work and let his eyes sort of wander toward me. I left him still looking for the clouds that weren't there while I got ready for the morning's business.

There would be breakfast for the family to be ready at

nine, the water heater at the Ballou's had to be started up since she said she'd be back from the city sometime today, the beds to make, and a little bit of sewing to do on the outfit I was going to wear to the ball game. In between all that, I would bet my molars, Bettina would somehow need to have a slip shortened, Dick would need a button sewed on his shirt collar, and Mr A would have me hunting up fresh rags that he needed for his painting. The only one, as ever, who would show any consideration would be Mrs A, who would bear down on the rest until they would leave me alone to get done with the work that had to be done. Every day she drew up a plan of the next day's work down to the last button, and she was a stickler for seeing it done right on the dot.

I knew that the cotton house dress I had put on had shrunk in the last washing, and when I took a good look in the pier glass I could tell it had shrunk even more than I had realized. But need I say that a cotton house dress that has shrunk does not have to be a liability when it has a square neckline and is tied back just a little tighter than usual? So I decided to make the most of it, and after shoving the feet into my sling pumps that had about one more week left in them, and grabbing my towel and toothbrush, I headed downstairs.

The bedroom doors on the second floor were all closed, and I thought that for a godsend the whole family was still asleep and I would have the bathroom for myself instead of having to use the one in the cellar, but when I got near the bathroom I heard voices inside. I looked around and then took a couple of steps toward the door, but it was hard to make out what was being said. From the voices I could tell it was Bettina and Mrs A, and from the hard whispering that was going on it was easy to tell that all was not quiet on the Nicholas Street front, but only a few words came through.

Bettina said something about, '*An affair with her!*' and then Mrs A said, 'I couldn't tell you! I couldn't! It would

have hurt you too much! Don't you see how it hurts you now!' and I started to get the picture. Somehow or other, Miss Innocence had caught on that when the Chaves and the Ballou were clocking time next door they weren't just discussing the best method of braising a roast, and, naturally, it must have hit hard.

'*All this time!*' Bettina said. '*All this time!*' and then she started to cry, with Mrs A saying, 'Please, baby,' but obviously not able to make things any better.

Well, we may all be sisters under the skin, but there are times when I would like to take one of the sisters and shake her until her teeth rattle. That is when some man steps out of line to prove that after all he is still a man, and lets you have it right in the face. And you *take* it!

So you can guess my feelings when after everything in the bathroom just turned to tears and I went downstairs, and there sound asleep on the living-room couch was the Chaves! He lay stretched out like mama's little lamb, his shirt and shoes and socks were thrown on the floor, if you please, and it didn't need any Sherlock Holmes to know he had been there for the night.

He had that nasty habit, too, of waking up all of a sudden and wide awake all at once, so that while I was looking at him he opened both eyes and stared right into my face. Then still without saying a word he dug around with his hand under the couch cushions and pulled out a cigarette-case. He took out a cigarette, put it in his mouth, and held out his hand toward me.

'Match,' he said, just like that.

That was the time for me to put up my nose at him and walk off. But what did little Junie find herself doing? Like something that the Mad Scientist has just finished working on she not only got a pack of matches from the end table, but lit one and held it so that Casanova could get a light without straining himself.

He blew out some smoke and then said, 'Going to the game?'

I said that considering Bob was going to pitch I would certainly be at the game.

'Do you still think he's big-league material?' asked the Chaves.

I told Mr District Attorney that anyone with a twelve and two record even in a semi-pro league could certainly do as well in the majors as some of the characters who were already there, although from their records it was hard to tell why.

'Well, you're wrong,' said the Chaves. 'And if you want to know why, I'll give you two reasons to start with.'

'I'm sure you will, Mr Chaves,' I said.

'First of all,' said he, not even taking note of the chill I was giving him, 'he doesn't know how to field his position, and he'd be bunted right out of any league where they really play ball. And second, he doesn't know how to sit on his temper.'

There was just enough truth in this to hurt, because it is Bob's argument that he is being paid to pitch and the other eight men around him are being paid to field, and what happened the week before on account of this was that when he was a little slow in covering first base on a grounder through the right side the runner ran right over him, and Bob naturally threw the ball away to take a swing at the man. Trust the Chaves to see Bob play one game and then write a book about it.

I told him that in so many words, but he only lay there looking at his cigarette as if now that he had gotten the big news off his chest his mind was a million miles away. Then suddenly he said, 'Junie, do you ever dream of being a model? A famous model with all the agencies running after you, and your picture on one magazine cover after another? Or Hollywood? Do you think that some day you might be right there in Hollywood working for a big studio with the whole world at your feet?'

I learned long ago that when you talked to the Chaves you had to be quick on your feet because you never knew what part of the field the ball would be coming from next, but this was even worse than usual.

First Bob and the big leagues, and now me and Hollywood! If anyone really wanted to know why the Chaves was let out of his fancy job in the city it would never take more than a few lines of fast talk with him to Tell All.

As a matter of fact, now and then while parading the body beautiful before the pier glass I had found it interesting to think of breaking into the big time as many another female has done with less to offer than I. Modelling never had much appeal for me, but there is a lot to be said about the silver screen as a life's work. After all, they are always looking for fresh talent, with the old-timers steadily aging at the rate of twenty-four hours a day, and if a girl chooses to meet them half-way she can hardly be blamed if she strikes them as being a new Lana Turner. I mentioned this because Bob and others have happened to point out my resemblance to her more than once.

But, of course, I would never mention any of this to Bob, who is very strong in his opinion that when a girl has majored in domestic science for four years in Sutton High she ought to be stuck with domestic science as her life's work, either for pay or for pleasure, and I certainly didn't think it was any business of the Chaves, which is what I told him.

'But', he prodded, 'what if I told you that if you gave me an honest answer I could tell you how happy you'd be all your life. Or, for that matter, how unhappy.'

That was the Chaves for you! At eight-thirty Sunday morning, lying on the couch, cigarette ashes already piling up on his bare chest, Bettina crying her heart out upstairs, and him playing games to find out if Junie will still be smiling when her hair has turned to silver.

'I'm very sorry, Mr Chaves,' I said, mixing the sugar and

the poison just right, 'but I'm afraid we'll have to continue this interesting little talk some other time. I have a houseful of work to do, including making up your bed and straightening your bedroom before the family comes down, so if you don't mind I'll just have to tear myself away.'

He looked at me with his eyes half closed, and I could see he was taking very good notice of the house dress.

'Junie,' he said, 'you add a note to Nicholas Street that it must have been crying for for a long, long time.' And with that compliment I let matters end then and there. They talk about a woman's having to get in the last word!

I was a little surprised to see out of the kitchen window that Mr A was working away at his painting already and, from the mess around him, working for some time. I decided to beat him to the gun for once, and after I washed up I found a few clean linen rags and went out into the yard. He was sitting there when I went up to him, and not working at it, but just staring at the painting.

It was a picture of the garage at the end of the alley between 161 and 159, a two-car job which Mr A shared with the Ballou. And while I will admit that it was not a bad-looking garage, as garages go it certainly didn't make much of a picture as you could see with half an eye. It took me a second look to even see what it was all about, all the colours were wrong and too bright, and the whole thing was more like a set of boxes and lines than any garage you ever saw.

There was a time when Mr A had just started painting, as a matter of fact, when he wasn't bad at all. But that was before the Ballou had started giving him advice on how to do it, and the next thing you know he was turning out stuff like some of the wild stuff she used to do in her spare time, and which was hanging all over the walls at 159.

I don't know anything about art, of course, but I do know what I like, and it wasn't anything you'd see in 159 or, for that matter, anything that Mr A had lately taken to storing

in the storage room right behind my room in the attic. And what got me was that the pictures the Ballou did for the magazines were so good that you knew it wasn't just bad painting that went into the other stuff.

I handed Mr A the rags, which he took without even appearing to notice me, and I was thankful for that since sometimes he would try to pin me down as to exactly what I thought of some picture he was doing. That kind of thing now, on top of the little workout with the Chaves, would have been just too much, so I steered back to the kitchen double quick. But, as I saw watching him through the window, he never did bother about the rags or the painting either right then. Just sat there staring at the garage, or it could have been the Ballou's house just beyond, as quiet as a mummy. Which, thought I, made it clear that Bettina's troubles had not been restricted to the bathroom.

CHAPTER 3

IN my opinion there is nothing more ridiculous than a person who has something really bothersome on the mind, but who is going to be brave and keep it from the world. How much better, say I, just to speak your little piece and clear the atmosphere once and for all.

If I ever needed anything to bear me out on this it was right there at that breakfast table. Bettina and Mrs A, both of them with their faces the same shade as the table cloth, spent the mealtime bravely trying to pass little bits of conversation back and forth, but none of it made any sense; Mr A sat looking at the wall the same way he had been looking at the garage; and Dick, of course, had to report late, and then only after Mrs A sent me upstairs three times to call him. He rounded out the picture very nicely by grabbing the

Sunday paper and wading through it right there at the table until Mrs A told him to please stop.

And, of course, in the middle of all this sat the Monster as calm as you please, like somebody who had no idea of what he had started or what was going on around him. In honour of the occasion he had borrowed Mr A's razor and shaved himself, and was wearing a clean sports shirt which I recognized as Dick's both because it was too big, and because I had ironed it two days before.

The talk around the merry board was something to listen to.

'Dick, dear,' said Mrs A to the Prince, who sat there with his nose in the paper, 'I want you to put that paper down this instant, and eat something.'

'I'm not hungry,' said Dick dear. 'And will you please leave me alone.'

Bettina didn't like the tone used. 'Don't you dare raise your voice to mother,' she said.

This, naturally, was the cue for the Chaves.

'In a free country,' he said, 'if a man wants to read a newspaper at the table . . .'

'Why don't you mind your own business!' said Bettina, who had evidently come a long, long way from her starry-eyed days.

'That', said the Chaves, 'is one of those rude chestnuts which contradicts everything civilization is moving toward. Rather, I would say, "*Ask not for whom the bell tolls*" . . .'

That brought even Mr A to attention. 'What?' he said.

'I was about to say', the Chaves explained, 'that if I were Dick I would excuse myself from the table and go read the Sunday paper to my heart's content elsewhere. In fact, I think it is the duty of every citizen on Sunday . . .'

Young Richard didn't wait for any more. He threw his napkin down on the table and walked out of the room, and the look that Mrs A gave the Chaves was just a dotted line with daggers on it. She opened her mouth to say something

and then shut it and looked at little me, who was carefully dusting crumbs from the table cloth.

‘Junie,’ she said, ‘if you started the dishes now you won’t keep Bob waiting when he calls, will you, dear?’

‘I guess not,’ said I, figuring that I wouldn’t be missing anything with my ear against the kitchen door.

As it turned out I was wrong for once. Although I almost rubbed a blister on my ear against the door whatever was being said was kept down to a mumble until all of a sudden Mr A suddenly said, ‘Matt!’ so loud and angry that I almost jumped back from the door.

There are times when a girl is driven to the danger point, and that was one if ever was. Finally, I pushed open the door a crack, just enough to see the Chaves standing beside Mr A’s chair holding Mr A by the shoulder and obviously trying to explain something to him. And, thought I, just from looking at Mr A’s back it was easy to tell that he wasn’t making much headway at it. Then Mr A flung away the arm and walked very fast out of the room while the Chaves stood there, taken aback for the first time in his life, I daresay, with the womenfolk staring at him from their chairs, their faces deathly white. The three of them were frozen like that so dead quiet and still that I could hear my own heart thumping, and suddenly the Chaves made a sweeping gesture with his arm as if to tell the both of them to go you know where and walked out just like Mr A had.

It was all this that had my mind in such a whirl that it wasn’t until I turned the hot water on my stack of dishes that I remembered I hadn’t even taken care of the Ballou’s heater next door! There was a woman who liked nothing so much as to stew in a tub of water hot enough to boil the skin right off you, and what with the time it would take to get the fire going in the heater and get the tank hot up to the top I would have to work double-quick to get things ready in time for milady’s arrival.

She had given me the key to 159 for the side door at the head of the cellar steps, and, naturally, it would have to be hanging on the hook by my dresser where I always left it. I cut up the stairs to the attic like an Olympic sprinter, and right there at the top of the stairs was pulled up short by something brand-new: for the first time since I had come to the house the door to the attic was tight shut. And not only shut, as I found out when I grabbed the knob and twisted it, but locked!

You can imagine my surprise when I say that not only was the attic door always kept hooked back against the wall, but that I had never known up to that moment that there was even a key to lock it with anywhere around.

You can think the wildest things at a moment like that, and what was the first thing that went through my head but that Mrs A had somehow noticed me with my ear to the kitchen door and was using this way to let me know that my services were no longer required. Which was followed by about eight other thoughts all just as ridiculous, but every one of them calculated to get me into the same mood that the rest of the family was already enjoying.

Finally, I gave the door just one good kick to show it what I thought of it, and then I headed for downstairs to report to Mrs A. If there was any key to the attic – and there certainly must be, or else the door was stuck so tight it would take a house wrecker to get it open – she would either have it or know where to lay hands on it. That meant the two long flights down again, and back to the kitchen where, as I suspected, Mrs A was stacking the rest of the dishes for me. I spoke my piece, and her jaw actually dropped.

‘The attic door?’ she said. ‘Locked?’

‘Very, very locked,’ said I.

‘I never,’ she said, and looked around at the kitchen as if she expected to find some handwriting on the wall that would Reveal All.

‘If you ask me,’ I told her, being careful to name no names, ‘there is someone in this house with a sense of humour that hurts. And he happens to know that if any little thing can make things hard for me it would be just a trick like that.’

‘He?’ said Mrs A, and then looked hard at me. ‘I don’t know any reason why he should know where the attic key is kept. Is there any reason, Junie?’

I suppose I could have read into this anything I wanted, but all that interested me was the news that there was a key, and that Mrs A could lay her hands on it.

I nicely hinted this to her, and she said, ‘But, of course. That key is always kept on a nail in the storeroom, right about where those paintings are stacked,’ and then suddenly she gasped, ‘Oh, no!’ and dashed for the stairs as if she had gone right out of her mind.

What could I do but race after her thinking that this had certainly blossomed into one beautiful Sunday, and up the stairs we went right to the top where Mrs A grabbed the knob of the attic door, and with one twist sent the door flying open!

It was my turn to have my jaw drop open, but I didn’t have time for that. Without appearing to take notice that the door wasn’t acting up as I had reported, Mrs A went down the little attic hall where the beams were so low she had to keep ducking her head to avoid them, and then threw open the door of the storeroom and looked in as if expecting Lord knows what. I looked in over her shoulder, and it was clear that there was nothing out of place. The only window to the storeroom was a sort of porthole, the size of a dinner plate, that looked out over the back yard, and under it were stacked Mr A’s masterpieces, and around the rest of the room were the few cartons of stuff that Mrs A thought worth saving. Outside of that, nothing.

For the first time since our gallop Mrs A seemed to take hold of herself. She turned around to me and said, ‘I thought

you told me the door was locked. I'm positive you said it, Junie.'

'I'm positive it was locked,' said I, and I was.

'But you see,' said Mrs A, 'it wasn't. It wasn't locked at all.' It was more as if she were telling it to herself than to me, and then she went over to the window and took something from a nail next to it, and held it out toward me. 'And there's the key,' she said, 'right where it belongs.'

Well, what's to do or say in a situation like that. I apologized very nicely, and then I took the Ballou's key from my room and walked downstairs behind Mrs A thinking my own thoughts, and none of them pleasant. And, sure enough, right there on the bedroom floor at the foot of the stairs stood the Chaves waiting, as it were, with just the flicker of a smile on his face like the cat who ate the canary and is finding even the tail feathers pleasant. That was just too much for little Junie to take, and I opened up on him as soon as Mrs A was out of earshot.

'I want to thank you, Mr Chaves,' I said, 'for all the fun you've provided me this morning.'

'It was nothing,' he said, as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

'And', said I, 'I want to tell you now that that attic is my personal living quarters in this house, and you are to stay away from it. Far away.'

'I will fight my impulses,' he said, 'and stay away from it.'

'And', said I, 'when Miss Ballou wants to know why her hot water wasn't ready when she gets back I will be glad to explain just what you had to do with it.'

That seemed to surprise him. 'Miss Ballou?' he said. 'But she came home last night.'

I grabbed my head.

'Last night!' I said, and I could hear my voice going up like a siren. 'You mean she's been sitting there waiting for

me to start that heater all this time, and you never said a word!’

After all, the woman had been paying me the kind of money that would allow me to finance the sort of home furnishing I always dreamed about when Bob and I would be united for better or worse, and while she was a good-tempered sort it could be some little thing like this that might mean the end of that income. I told that to the Monster, and to indicate his great concern he shrugged his shoulders.

‘If that’s what worries you,’ said he, ‘you’ve got more to worry about than you know. Miss Ballou came back to pick up some personal things and take them back to New York. When she shakes the dust of Sutton off those white-walled specials this evening, I have a feeling it will be for the last time.’

For an instant I believed him, and then I didn’t, and then I didn’t know what to believe. All I could think of was a certain bedroom suite in Hibbard’s that would be a long, long time in coming if all this was true, and I actually felt sick to my stomach. But it is human nature to keep hopes up, and the way to do that, I figured, was to carry on until the evidence was all in, one way or the other.

So I said, ‘Well, if she’s home now she’ll still be wanting her hot water,’ thinking that there was nothing like a direct question to milady to put an end to misery.

‘No,’ said the Chaves, and my suspicions of his sense of humour started to percolate again. ‘I wouldn’t bother about it now, if I were you, Junie. I don’t think it’s important to her right now, and I don’t think she’s in a mood right now to have anyone bother around her, or the house for that matter.’

If anything could have prodded me on it was just this. ‘Thank you’, said I, ‘for your very kind advice, Mr Chaves. But if you don’t mind I’ll do what Miss Ballou expects me to do until I’m told different.’

I moved away and he took hold of my shoulder. 'Look, Junie . . .' he started to say, but I pulled loose.

'If you *don't* mind, Mr Chaves,' I said, and went down the stairs with everything upside down in me.

Well, he wasn't lying about her being home, as I could tell when I crossed the driveway in front of the garage, and could see the gleam of that big Cadillac convertible on her side of it. And he wasn't lying about her not being in the mood for anything, as I could see when I got the side door to her place open and started down the cellar steps. Because there she lay at the bottom of the steps as grey and limp and dead as anything I ever hope to see in all the days I spend on this earth.

PART TWO · *Lucille*

CHAPTER 1

BACKBONE.

There never was one of the Ayres breed that had it or ever will have it, and that is the truth about the lot of them. And it was the old man himself said so that night when Harry sat down at the table and showed him the paper from the accountants. The hundred thousand in stocks gone three years before, a month after the market crash; the property on Monroe Avenue all gone; and the inventory of the store not worth a button. And the old man sitting there looking at the piece of paper with his hands shaking so that when he tried to take a drink of water he splashed it all over my fresh table-cloth.

'We still have the house,' I said, and the old man looked at me and said, 'Lucille, you have more backbone than all the Ayres put together. Thank God for that,' he said, and put down the glass and walked away from the table with not a bite of food in him.

I couldn't help thinking about that when Junie told me about the attic being locked, because it had not been locked since that night. At eleven o'clock that night Harry had come into the bedroom, and there was that look on him that got me out of bed before he even spoke a word.

'Have you seen father?' he said. 'He isn't in his room, or the bathroom, and when I went downstairs to lock up I didn't see him anywhere. I've even been up to the attic, but the door is locked up there. . . .'

'Harry,' I said, 'I never locked that door,' and although I was seven months along with Richard then, I was never more than a step behind Harry when he went up those stairs again, and broken open the door with his shoulder, and there was the old man hanging from that piece of clothes-line. And the worst part was the way he had neatly hung up his

jacket and tie as if they were something supposed to go to the tailor in the morning.

So it was always some consolation to know that while the old man and I never did take to each other too well the very last words he spoke to anybody in the world showed he knew what I meant to him and Harry. Although little enough I had to thank him for when tongues started wagging up and down Nicholas Street, and Rose McIntyre and Freda Lutey and the rest of them were handed their chance to take down the Ayres a lick or two.

But it is backbone that makes respectability and keeps idle tongues from wagging, and the old man had none any more than Harry had when high and mighty Miss Ballou came along and waggled her finger at him, or Bettina had when Matthew Chaves decided she'd be a nice one to fetch and carry for him. Even Richard is all Ayres sometimes, with his head in the clouds and his feet tripping over all the rocks in the road, but when it comes to Richard I will say with a full heart that it is something for a mother to know that what she has been to a son and done for him is truly appreciated. And, as I am not ashamed of saying, I think Richard shows as much loving appreciation of his mother as any son could.

Of course, a son's feelings are never really tested until he's married (and then let's see how much he thinks of his mother) but a boy who thinks to phone and write regularly when at camp or away from home for some reason, or who takes the trouble to prepare a lovely little poem as a secret surprise, or who knows just what little things his mother would appreciate as a gift, these things are no small sign of the future, and can lead one to look forward to it with anticipation and not fear as so many mothers must.

I was thinking that very thought when through the kitchen window I saw Junie running across the alleyway from Katherine Ballou's, and I wished at that moment that

Dick, and some others on Nicholas Street whose eyes pop out when she passes them on the street, could have seen her as she looked just then. Stuffed into that ridiculous dress with every part of her flopping and jiggling, her hair every which way, and those shoes she persisted in wearing until she knew I would give in and tell her to take one of Bettina's slightly used pairs, she was really a spectacle.

She came into the kitchen and then she leaned back against the wall with the breath pumping in and out of her so that you could hear it, and her hand holding tightly against her side as if there were a stitch there and she were trying to ease it. And in her eyes that kind of flighty look you see on a skitterish horse that's had a piece of paper blown in front of him.

'Junie!' I said very sharply, pulling the reins on her as it were. 'What's wrong!'

'Miss Ballou!' she said. 'Down the cellar steps . . . !'

'Yes?' I said.

'Dead!' said Junie. 'She's dead!' and then she started to laugh and cry in that mixed up way a body does when she is all wound up for a spell of hysterics, and is going to enjoy every bit of it.

I slapped her across the face just once, but good and hard.

'Junie,' I said, 'you come out of that!'

She put her hand up across her face with a surprised look, but she came out of it. Her breathing eased up, and she shook her head at me. 'I didn't mean anything, Mrs Ayres,' she said. 'It's the way she's laying there. It was seeing her all of a sudden. . . .'

If there is anything I cannot abide it is a person thinking that what you are doing for her good is being done because you are heartless. And in that way a girl like Junie is a living trial, because you have to work twice as hard to prove to her that all you are doing to make her a decent and useful woman is done out of good, old fashioned love; the

kind of love that every human being ought to feel toward even the humblest of God's creatures, old fashioned as that might sound.

So I patted her and made a fuss over her, the big baby, and then when she had herself in hand again I left her there and went across the way to Katherine Ballou's. The side door was swinging open, and the screen door was unlatched so I just went in, and down at the bottom of the cellar steps was that woman. She had long gone to wherever a woman like that goes in the afterlife, and the good Lord in His miraculous way had heeded the prayer of a wife and mother who had called on Him in her distress and had smote down the transgressor.

She lay sprawled out at the foot of those stairs as wanton and shameless as she was in life, one leg still partway up the stairs and her legs showing as far as her garters. And that red hair spilled over the floor and wisps of it now and then stirring when the draft blew down the steps, so that it looked as if it were the one part of her that was still alive.

In her outstretched hand, still gripped tight, was the handle of the screen door upstairs, the same kind of small brass handle we had on ours at 161, and you could see the ends of it sticking out beyond her clenched fist, and one end had the screw in it.

Her blouse had been torn from the shoulder to half-way down the waist at the back so that you could see her brassière strap peeking through, and I neatly pulled the edge of the torn blouse together, and then pulled her skirts down so that she would be a little less of a spectacle. And while I was doing that I was thinking of everything that would have to be arranged: the doctor and the police called in like they were when the old man went, and a good, sound, common-sense talk with Harry. It certainly wasn't too much to hope that Harry could come to his senses now, and in all truthfulness I never felt more forgiveness for the erring than I did

just then. Over and over I had told myself that it was woman who first tempted man to evil, that it would always be woman who did this, and that no man could be more susceptible than one who is in those dangerous downhill years and meets a glib-talking, perfumed woman of no morals who makes it her business to convince him he is irresistible.

Hold a mirror before such a man to let him see his weary image, tell him the truth about himself, show him the mockery being made of him by such a woman, and he is blind, deaf, and dumb to you. But it is not the man's fault, not in such a case as Harry's. It is temptation that comes to seek them with a tongue always wagging smoothly, and with the kind of body a woman can afford if she never chooses to bear children and feed them at her breast and spend her life like a drudge to make a home for them and their father. It is temptation that must come right up to a man and shake him by the shoulders until he recognizes it and answers it, while all the wife and mother can do is go around with her eyes red and the fear in her heart that the Rose McIntyres and Freda Luteys and their world of scandalmongers will guess the truth, or that her children will discover it.

So I stood over the serpent that lay with her head crushed in the dust, and knew that the nightmare was over. There were times when I had almost surrendered, when the pride and decency in me were at such a low ebb that I said to myself, 'Why are you fighting? Why do you choose to suffer like this?' but now I could be glad I had faced the battle. Faced it even at such a moment as this very morning when Matthew Chaves chose to open his vile mouth the way he had.

And then everything seemed too much for me all of a sudden and my knees buckled. I held on to the wall and slowly made my way back up the steps out to the sunshine and fresh air in the driveway where I found the strength

coming back to me. In the kitchen at 161 Junie was sitting at the table, and in front of her was the bottle of elderberry wine we used on occasions now and then, and she was sipping at a glass of it, knowing that I would never object at a time like this. I simply walked past her into the dining-room and through it to the living room. Harry sat there, part of the Sunday paper in his lap, but his head was resting against the back of his chair, and his eyes were closed.

‘Harry,’ I said, and he opened his eyes and looked at me. ‘Harry, there’s been an accident next door.’

‘Next door?’ he said dully.

‘At 159,’ I said.

He sat up slowly, not even noticing the papers that went sliding to the floor, and his hands took hold of the arms of his chair so that I could see his fingers digging into the material. And from the way he looked at me right then I think he knew. How he could know was beyond me, but when he looked at me like that I was sure he knew.

‘Katherine Ballou fell down the cellar steps there, Harry,’ I said.

He got up from the chair and took a step toward me, his face showing his feeling for her as clear as if the words were written on his forehead.

‘Is it serious?’ he said. ‘Is she hurt?’

‘She’s stone cold dead, Harry,’ I told him.

CHAPTER 2

It isn’t any more than a ten-minute drive from the police-station near the Plaza up to Nicholas and Monroe, but our police department being what it is, naturally we had to wait half an hour before anybody showed up. Which was more than enough time, of course, for all the busybodies on the

block to smell trouble in the wind and come a-running. So I stood in the driveway with Bettina and Junie while Harry and Matthew Chaves were down in that cellar, and all around me Freda and Rose and Mort Bennauer yap-yapping like school children waiting for the circus parade to come by.

And, of course, Junie had perked up considerably when it struck her that she was set to be a centre of attention, and trust her to have smeared on lipstick and fixed her hair and to be acting up like queen of the ball.

I finally got her off to the side and told her good and proper. 'Junie,' I said, 'there's a time and place for everything, and what has happened here is that a precious life has been removed from our midst.'

That brought her to her senses all right, and she said, 'Yes, Mrs Ayres, I'm sorry,' as sweet as could be. I will say for the girl that there isn't an ounce of vice in her, but the kind of ignorance and thoughtlessness you would find in anyone who hadn't a stitch of real bringing-up. Which are the exact words I told to Rose McIntyre after I had mentioned how I found the girl laying all over Richard the first week we had her, and Richard helped her with the dishes, and Rose mentioned that the girl's mother was known all around the Five Corners section as a terrible drunk and bound to end up in the County Home.

'Well,' I said to Rose, 'the more's the reason one has to forgive and forget, and try to be the kind of mother to the girl she's never known.'

'Lucille,' said Rose, and you could see she meant it with all her heart, 'you'd just naturally like to be the mother of everybody in this whole wide world.'

I had to laugh at the serious way she said it, but I was a little bit proud, too, that she had, no use denying it. Fact is, Rose had absolutely no control over her own Charlie and was always bursting with surprise at the way Richard and Bettina and I seemed to work out our little problems so

nicely. No fuss, no hurt feelings; just a little heart-to-heart chat was all. A couple of words to Richard, for example, about how it was only right to leave Junie alone while she was doing dishes, and to remember she was just being paid to work for us and must be respected for it – well, that was all it took.

For a while, after Bettina took up with Matthew Chaves I was afraid it would have a bad effect on Richard, who seemed to be so impressed by Matthew's sharp tongue and his nasty ways. And for all I know, if I hadn't stepped in to speak my piece to Richard it might have turned out as badly as I feared.

'Dick,' I said, 'I want you to be as courteous and considerate to Matthew as if he were one of the people in your own circle who knows the good things of life. He comes from a slum in New York, he's had a hard struggle getting up as far as he did, and we have to help him by our example. If you simply close your eyes to the way he dresses and talks and acts, and show him by your example how one does these things, you yourself will be acting like a true gentleman.'

'But he says', Dick started to explain, 'that these things aren't important, mother. He says . . .'

'And you mustn't argue with him about it,' I told him. 'All you can do is show him how a gentleman does act. If anything can bring him to the point where he can see how poorly suited he is for Bettina, that will be it, won't it, dear?'

For that was the other burden I had to bear in the years that should have been so happy with fulfilment: not only had Katherine Ballou entered Harry's life at the worst possible time, but she had brought Matthew Chaves into Bettina's life. And Bettina, a child who needed to be prodded into attending any little social gathering where boys would be present, had actually responded to the man as if that was what I had been preparing her for in all the years that had gone into her education and bringing-up.

'I'm from the west side of Manhattan,' Matthew had once told me right out, 'the west side right next to the waterfront. And, strange as it seems, I always found it filled with the same kind of people you might meet in any neighbourhood you go into. Just average people, good, bad and indifferent.'

As if I hadn't driven through that section with Harry and seen for myself it was just one big Five Corners, only a hundred times bigger and more miserable! Or didn't read the papers enough to know the kind of goings-on you'd find there! It was that which really stung him, I think: that I could look at him and his ways and his background with my eyes open, and not with them tight shut and my jaw hanging down like my daughter did.

What did she see in him? I would say, exactly what some of the girls in Five Corners saw in the young men who lounged obscenely against drugstore windows and pool parlour doorways there. The attraction of plain indecent sexualism and lust openly displayed. Another mother might not admit it, might not pronounce to herself that her own daughter is one with slatterns in Five Corners or down by the ferry district. But I choose to look facts in the face. I always have. I always will.

It was blood telling again, the same blood that touched the old man with scandal in his youth, that led Harry to the kind of affair with a woman like Katherine Ballou that you could imagine in a city tabloid, the same Ayres blood that was in Bettina. Of all of them, only Richard had escaped because, as my sister, Edna, once put it to me, 'That boy is more Pickett than Ayres, Lucille, and thank God for that.'

What can a mother do when a Matthew Chaves enters her daughter's life? She can plead with the girl; she can plead with the man; and she might as well be beating her head against a stone wall. The greatest misfortune that could be recorded was that Bettina knew so little of decent, worth-

while young men that she had no basis for comparison. And Matthew Chaves was not one to hesitate in taking advantage of this.

I always knew that if Harry had only stood at my side during this struggle, Bettina would surely have yielded to decency and common sense. But, said Harry (and there is the difference between a father's heart and a mother's), it was her life. *Her* life, mind you, so that she could go straight down the road to perdition for all he cared. After all, my own husband in the eyes of God and man did not hesitate to put his wife aside for the embraces of a cheap, perfumed slut he barely knew, so why should he trouble himself about the mess his daughter intended to make of *her* life.

But even alone I had fought the good fight, and the fact that Bettina's eyes were opened that morning to just what kind of man her father was could mean I had victory in my grasp. Standing there by the bathroom sink, her hair in those long braids, her face shining, she looked so much like my little girl of years before that I could have cried. Was it that which gave me strength to tell her right out, 'I've stood enough! His rudeness, his meanness, everything about him I've swallowed till I'm full up to here. But talk about marriage I will not listen to!'

'But it's come to that now,' she said, looking as if she were ready to cry, and my heart ached for her.

'Then, if it has it's your business to settle it on the spot. He's got to get out of this house as soon as he can, and he's not to show his face around here again!' Those were the very words I said to her, and I said them with a feeling of relief that I had been finally forced to them.

'If that's the way it is,' she said, 'I'm going with him.'

'Where?' I asked her. 'Down to that smelly little room of his over the ferry house?'

'If that's what he wants,' she said. My fine young lady thanking me for twenty-two years of love and devotion.

'Yes,' I said, 'so he can lie there and read his books while you work all day to support him.'

'I'll do that, too,' she said, and that really shook me. If a woman has no more pride than to talk like that what is there left to her?

'You'll do nothing of the kind,' I said, 'because there's only one thing he wants of you, and that's what any man wants of any woman. And when he's had that he'll go on his way until he finds some other little fool just like you so that he can start the game all over again!'

Her eyes were staring into mine. And she was Ayres then, all Ayres, with that same look the old man got once or twice when he was really wild.

'What makes you think he hasn't already had that of me!' she cried out.

My heart stuck in my throat, and then looking at her I knew it was just talk. Talk, and no more than that. I swung my hand back and hit her across the face as I hadn't done since she was in pinafores. 'If you ever give me reason to suspect anything,' I said. 'If you ever dare talk like that!' And then I had to hold on to the edge of the sink I felt so undone. And with that I knew I must tell her. I knew that Harry had never spoken a word to her as he swore he would, and it was all up to me.

So I told her. Who it is that makes the home and must defend it. It is the woman, the wife and mother. And the man wilfully fighting against it, betraying it. Unless, perhaps, he were a man like her brother, a man like some of the decent boys with background and breeding enough to show them where their duties lay. 'Not,' I told her, 'like Matthew Chaves. Or - your father.'

Her face went like a deaf one's trying to hear and understand something. 'No,' she said, 'Oh, no.'

'Yes,' I said, 'for a year now. With Katherine Ballou. On those little trips to New York when he's supposed to be

working so hard at business appointments. Oh, yes, indeed, for a year now and maybe longer.'

'No,' she said, and her voice got higher as if she were trying to convince herself, and maybe me, that it couldn't be. 'An affair with her?'

It was a bad time, I would never deny that, but it promised a good end. And it was a miracle of good fortune that I had the sense to talk to her as I did before Matthew Chaves chose to speak as he did at the breakfast table, because like somebody throwing a boomerang it only came back to hit him. And the way she reacted to him when he went upstairs to tell her about Katherine Ballou's death was enough to show me that she was growing up, and growing up fast.

And it was about time.

CHAPTER 3

WHEN Morten Ten Eyck was picked to be police chief I had it straight from Rose McIntyre (Howie McIntyre was on the Town Council at that time) that he was chosen because he was known to be such a tight man with a penny. That was about the same year the old man did for himself. Very hard times for everybody, of course, and what with the township funds almost gone and Hibbard's new department store having put the old Ten Eyck store right out of business, it seemed a sensible thing all around. The town could have a good, respectable police chief who would stretch every cent to the limit, and Morten would have some way of putting bread on his table.

'Although', as Rose put it in that way of hers, 'I can just see those old Ten Eycks whirling in their graves at the way one of their precious brood is forced to become a mere cop.'

Well, that is Rose all over, a body who has never learned to swallow the fact that neither her people nor Howie's were one of the old families, and who is always poking and prodding at it like a sore tooth to show folks it doesn't matter. It is almost funny to see the way you can get a rise out of her by just mentioning that the Ayres were, of course, Nicholases on the old lady's side, and were right here in town before there was even any town to speak of. But knowing how she feels about this I make it a point to steer clear of mentioning it. I know, and have brought up my children to know, that it is not what your parents were, but what *you* are that counts in this world of ours.

Still, I had to go along with Rose when she said that she would be mortified if she were May Ten Eyck, married to a man who actually kept his change in a little purse, and who looked and dressed as if he couldn't afford to give away a suit until he had worn it down to the last thread. And I have seen him with my own eyes walking along with his eyeglasses barely held together with a piece of adhesive plaster, and he has been going around with that smelly old pipe of his patched with plaster, too, for heaven knows how long.

There is no sweeter woman in town than May herself (although Dutch Reformed), and I made it my business once where opportunity offered itself to mention gently that since Morten was, so to speak, a representative of the town he really ought to make more of an appearance for the town's sake, especially in front of outsiders.

'Well, if you feel that way, Lucille,' said May, 'just tell Morten about it any time you want. After all, dear,' she said, 'you and Freda and Rose are taxpayers, and certainly have every right to do so.' Which, I must remark, is a curious way for a wife to talk about her husband and his affairs. For my part, if Harry ever let himself go so that someone had to come to me about his appearance I would have sunk right through the ground with embarrassment,

and it would be the last thing in the world I'd do to send them off to Harry himself.

And as for talking to Morten Ten Eyck about such personal matters, it wasn't something you could do just off-hand. He was Dutch all the way through, of course, and he had that square, blocky look, and those pale eyes which hardly invited any real warmth or friendship. And terribly old-fashioned, too, like some of those other families, the Ten Broecks, and the Van Der Meers, who carried on at times so that you'd think this was three hundred years ago, and not right now in 1951 and hardly three hours' drive from New York City at that.

In my opinion, it was Morten's old-fashionedness and his narrow ways which did as much to send his store under as anything else, and, as I told Rose, it must have been a hard trial for May, who thought she was marrying money and position and so on, to find it all melting away overnight, and nothing left except a houseful of young ones, each and every one the spit and image of Morten, and Morten himself bringing home hardly enough pay from the town to bring them up properly. Not that anyone ever heard May complain, of course, much as you'd expect her to.

For that matter, no one ever heard Morten complain about anything either, and Harry once told me that at Rotary he was very popular and showed a good sense of humour, although, as I pointed out, any man who depended on the votes of the respectable members of the Town Council to have his contract renewed every five years would naturally butter up to Rotary, which had several influential members on the Council. But he was a good police chief, I must admit, always taking pains to extend himself a little for the better element in town, which, of course, is the important thing.

Knowing his penny pinching it was no surprise to see him driven up to 159 in the ambulance from Sutton General instead of the official police car since this would mean a

charge to the hospital fund and not the police. There was the driver and an orderly in front of the ambulance, and Morten and Dr Greenspan, the town medical officer, in back, and praise be, when they did drive up it was with no sirens or bells sounding off to attract everyone in the neighbourhood, likely because it was Sunday, and, of course, the Nicholas Street neighbourhood.

They all came walking up the driveway, and when I said something about how long it had taken them Morten seemed to think it over in that maddening slow and deliberate way of his, and then said, 'Well now, I guess we were all pretty much at home getting ready for the ball game,' as if he were standing up in a court of law and testifying about something really important.

'Well, Morten,' I said – a little peevishly, I have to admit – 'it's just too bad that poor soul next door didn't think of that when she fell down and killed herself. Otherwise', I said, 'she would have made sure not to do anything that would spoil your precious ball game.'

This went right over his head, of course, and he just blinked at me. 'Did you find her?' he asked. 'That is, the body?'

Miss Junie was right there, Johnny-on-the-spot. 'I found her,' she said. 'I was supposed to take care of the water heater, and when I went in, there she was! It was awful. She was laying there . . .'

'She was dead,' I said. 'I went right down a couple of minutes later and saw for myself.'

Morten took a deep breath. 'Well now,' he said to Junie, 'you wait here. Or in the house,' he said. 'And you too, Lucille, so I can make out my report. Meanwhile, we'll go take a look.'

So he and Dr Greenspan and the driver and the orderly all went trooping into 159, and seeing that just the sight of the ambulance in front of the house was drawing more and

more busybodies around I took Junie's arm and Bettina's, and we went into our kitchen. In my opinion it would take just a couple of minutes for them to get Katherine Ballou's mortal remains out of the cellar and out of sight, once and for all, so I was pretty much on tenterhooks watching the minute hand of the clock crawl around and wondering whatever in the world was going on in that cellar at 159. Once the thought stabbed me that maybe she wasn't dead, maybe she'd come walking right out of that door herself with Harry next to her, and that something in his face would show just how he felt about her and what was going on. But then I told myself not to be a booby, the woman was dead and gone, and everything was the way it should be.

But it was a long hour, and a hard one on my nerves, before the men finally came out of the side door there. Then they all just stood there while the driver and the orderly went back to the ambulance and drove it right up to the door and the body was put in that way. When the ambulance pulled away only Morten stayed, and he watched there with Harry and Matthew Chaves until the machine was gone, and then the three of them pushed their way through the folks in the driveway and came into the kitchen. There was a little bit of an awkward silence as Morten looked around at all of us, and he finally said, 'There's something very important to talk about. So if you want to go into a room where people won't be looking through the window . . .'

'Important?' I said. 'What do you mean by that?'

'Well now,' said Morten, 'there are some things to clear up, some problems you might say. And I'd just as soon do it private, Lucille, for your sake, and on account of these others here.'

'Morten,' I said very firmly, 'now that you've taken care of everything so nicely I'm sure there's nothing so important that we should be made late for Second Service. If you don't mind . . .'

‘I haven’t taken care of anything yet,’ said Morten. ‘And I think maybe for once you’ll have to miss services, Lucille. And the rest of you, too,’ he said, looking around at everyone in the kitchen.

If you can picture a man who always struck me as being very serious being even more serious than usual you can understand why I did not feel I should make any great fuss about the matter. And that even though I knew that the dining-room and living-room were both a mess – the dining-room not completely cleared up from breakfast, and the living-room with all the papers thrown around it and probably cigarette ashes and stubs all around, what with Matthew Chaves having been there all morning. Which would make a perfectly delightful tidbit about my housekeeping for Morten to bring back to May, if you please. But I just marched myself into the living-room and plumped myself down and let them all trail after to make themselves as much at home as they wanted in the middle of the mess.

Matthew sat down on the edge of the sofa, and, I was glad to see, Bettina took one look at him and very deliberately walked to the other side of the room, to the hard chair there, uncomfortable as it was. Then Harry sat down on the sofa with Matthew, and Morten pulled the piano stool out and perched on it sucking that old pipe of his and acting as if he were busy figuring out some kind of riddle and hoped we wouldn’t bother him at it. And, of course, Miss Junie, who was never one to miss a trick, came in and waited near the doorway, giving me a look out of the corner of her eye to see if I would notice this.

‘Junie,’ I said to her, very nicely, of course, because it was easy enough to understand her popping with curiosity. ‘I’m sure you heard Mr Ten Eyck say he wanted to talk to us privately, so if you just finish off in the kitchen, and close the door there . . .’

She was already about-facing when Morten pointed his

finger at her. 'No,' he said, 'you stay here, young lady. And', he said, pointing to the chair near the doorway, 'you better sit down. It might be a little while.'

Talk about giving a girl ideas of her own importance! 'Morten,' I pointed out, 'Junie has a houseful of work to do, and if you would kindly let her mind her own business it can be done by the time you're through acting like some detective out of a storybook.'

'It can wait,' he said, and I could just see him saying that to May when she had her sleeves rolled up ready to tend to *her* housework. But the way he was acting up I decided to just sit back and close my mouth like a trap.

'Now,' Morten said, and looked around at all of us, 'I'd like to do some serious talking about this business next door, and then maybe ask some questions.'

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a handful of stuff which he laid out neatly on the floor in front of him. From where I sat I could see that one of the things was that handle from the screen door which had been in Katherine Ballou's fist, and the sight of it sent a shudder through me. Then there was a raggedy little chunk of wood, a small grey chamois bag, and finally a crumpled piece of paper which he smoothed out carefully and folded in half before laying it down.

'This might look like I'm going to do some kind of magic act,' Morten remarked, 'and maybe in a way I am. Because these little things here change one picture into another right while you look.'

'One picture is of a young lady who is all alone in a house, and who had to go down to her cellar for something. Dr Greenspan says that when we saw her she was dead at least six hours, maybe eight, maybe a little more. That meant she started down to that cellar between one o'clock in the morning and four o'clock in the morning. Maybe that's a funny time for a young lady to go down to her cellar, but we found

that this young lady came in from the city very late, and that she sometimes worked at painting pictures all night long. So we can figure that maybe there was something in the cellar she wanted for the painting.

‘Whatever the reason, she started down to the cellar, and because she was wearing silly shoes she tripped and fell at the head of the stairs, right by the screen door on the landing. She grabbed the handle of the door, it came off in her hand, and down she went to the bottom and was killed.’

Harry put his face in his hands at this, but Morten paid him no attention, just looked squarely at me. ‘Anyhow,’ said Morten, ‘that’s one picture.’

‘And,’ said I, ‘it happens to be the way I would have explained it if anybody had asked me. Although’, I told him straight out, ‘I wouldn’t need to have everybody sitting around like a bunch of wooden Indians while I made a fuss over it.’

Morten shook his head slowly at me. ‘Yes?’ he said. ‘But now watch what happens to that picture.’

He jabbed the stem of his pipe at the handle of the screen door lying there on the floor. ‘That was in the young lady’s hand,’ he said, ‘and I’d like to ask you, Lucille, if you don’t think it’s strange for somebody to fall down a flight of stairs and still hold on to something like this?’

‘Maybe,’ I said, ‘and maybe not. How can you tell what a body’ll do at a time like that?’

‘Why do you say “a body”?’ he demanded suddenly.

I sat bolt upright. ‘Morten Ten Eyck,’ I said, ‘you know as well as I do that’s just a manner of speaking!’

‘Oh,’ he said, and then appeared to brush the matter aside. ‘Then I’ll tell you it’s very unlikely someone falling down like this would want to hold something in her hand when she would need both hands to break her fall. And beyond that is the fact that this young lady could not possibly pull the handle from the door! I looked at the door, and it’s

made of good wood like my own screen doors. It would take someone very strong to even start the handle loose. Somebody so strong', and he pointed the pipe toward that little chunk of wood on the floor, 'that he could even rip a piece of wood loose from the door if he tried hard enough.'

"He"?" I said. 'But it was in *her* hand.'

'And that's where Dr Greenspan comes in again,' said Morten. 'He found the back of the lady's hand all bruised, the way it would be if her hand stuck hard in the handle here, and the back of her hand pushed up against the door. And there were bad bruises on her shoulder and arm, too, the kind she'd get from a hand pulling at her while she was holding on to that handle.'

He held up a hand to stop me from speaking. 'If you're going to say those bruises could come from her falling, Lucille, you can forget that. Those bruises were finger marks; that woman died of a broken neck; and I think she died there at the top of the stairs and not at the bottom. And I also think you see how the picture changes. Instead of a young lady who wants to go down to her cellar it looks like we have a young lady, and a man, very strong, and maybe she didn't want to go down to the cellar at all. Certainly not the way she did go.'

Maybe that was the kind of humour that Harry thought was so remarkable when Morten used it at Rotary, but I didn't find anything funny in it right then.

'You mean', Bettina said numbly, 'she was killed. Killed by somebody and no accident at all.' And it was easy to see that although she didn't want to, that although she was struggling against it, her eyes were being turned slowly toward Matthew Chaves there on the sofa.

I was praying for her then. If she could only understand what her gesture meant, if she could only see that just to have such suspicions of a man meant he was all wrong for her, surely she would squarely face the decision she was fumbling

and bumbling about since I had opened my heart to her that morning.

Her precious Matthew had to go, I had made that plain as day to her, and while I hardly expected her to tell him, 'It was nice knowing you, and here's the door,' in just so many words, she would have to talk it over with him and say something that amounted to that before I set head to pillow that night. It's one thing when a man walks into your home, sloven and mean as he might look at a glance, and you're given to understand that he has a fine job and a chance of doing even better for himself, and quite another when you find out that he's had to leave the job under a cloud and taken up work that pays barely enough to keep him, much less a wife and family.

What does a mother with any heart think then? She thinks to herself, I have a daughter who's such a mouse that she's afraid to even lift her eyes when some nice, presentable young man – Charlie McIntyre, or that Oliver boy around the corner – says hello to her. And if having Matthew Chaves around will give her a better opinion of herself and put a little backbone into her, well, no harm done. And if Charlie McIntyre or Paul Oliver happens to notice that there's some man thinks enough of Bettina to be sitting on her porch every time they pass by, well, it might put an idea or two into their heads. That's what a mother thinks when she lies awake in the dark hours trying to find some way to smooth the path ahead of her children.

In my opinion, it was Harry's encouragement that led her to carry things right up to talk about marriage.

'I like the man, Lucille.' That was Harry for you.

'Father says it's up to me only.' My daughter, no less.

And mother, of course, had to be the bad one.

Well, it was not the first time. Father was the one who gave the candy, and mother the one who gave the medicine, and when all the tears were dried no one seemed to be any

the worse for it, although I never dreamed the time would ever come when I had to tell Bettina about her father, and show him to her as he really was. And the irony of it being that the woman was dead in her cellar the very moment I was speaking the words.

No matter about that, Bettina had to face the fact that Harry's opinions were worth no more than what Harry himself was worth as far as decency and respectability were concerned. And Matthew's ranting and raving at the breakfast table should certainly have settled everything for her, except that she still shied away from making the final break. Part of it, of course, was the whole business of Katherine Ballou's sudden death which had shaken Bettina up dreadfully, and which Morten wasn't making any easier to bear. And part was her own good nature, I am sure, since even as a child she could never bring herself to hurt any creature, no matter how justified she would have been.

But watching her as Morten talked I didn't doubt that it was just a matter of her finding the right words to put Matthew Chaves in his place once and for all. She sat there with her hands folded on her lap, and her lips tight together, and her eyes stealthily slanted toward Matthew, and only when Morten said to her, 'I'm afraid you're right, Bettina. The woman was killed by someone, and no accident at all,' did she look away quickly. She tried to say something, but it stuck in her throat, and when Morten looked at her puzzled she cleared her throat hard, and then managed to say, 'You mean, a prowler. It was a prowler,' in the sort of flat, expressionless way she would have read out, 'I-have-a-cat', to the children in her class.

Morten sucked in his lips, and rubbed his finger along his nose, and looked up at the ceiling, and finally said, 'Well now, let's make believe you're a prowler, Bettina. A big strong tough from Five Corners maybe who heard that this lady's house is empty a lot of the time, and she has so much

money, and you say to yourself, "Aha, I'll go there and clean the place out."

'But when you get into the house you find the lady is there, and so because you are afraid you kill her. But before the lady finds you, and after she is dead, you can do just what you want in the house. And in the kitchen, three steps up from the landing where the side door is, and right on the kitchen table in front of you, is this.' And Morten reached down, picked up the chamois bag, and spilled out everything it held into his hand.

There must have been a dozen pieces there at least, and all of them looked expensive to me. I could make out the ring she usually wore with the emerald set into it, and another ring with a huge diamond in it, and a pair of pearl earrings, and then Morten slid everything back into the bag.

'And next to this', he said, 'is a pair of lady's gloves, but since you're a smart prowler you know that lady's gloves aren't worth stealing anyhow. But next to that is a pocket-book and in it is about five hundred dollars in nice clean bills. Now you tell me, Bettina, do you go out and leave this little bag and that money in the pocketbook on the kitchen table?'

'If I was frightened enough,' said Bettina. 'If I knew I had killed somebody . . .'

'Oh,' said Morten, 'but when you went into that house you knew you were breaking in, and you knew you were going to rob someone.'

'But it's different to kill somebody!' Bettina flared up. 'If that happened all I'd think about would be to run away. As far as I could and as fast as I could, but just get away. And what would I care about any money or jewellery then!'

The way she shouted it out, the way she acted as if all this were real and important to her, and not just Morten's manner of getting to a conclusion in his usual roundabout

way, well, it took me clean by surprise. And then I understood. She was making it her business to grab hold of anything that would help Matthew, would keep him out of the picture as far as possible. Why, the way she looked and acted right then, if she could have gone out on the street and found some miserable tramp, innocent as the day was long for all she cared, and he would have said he did it she would have sold her soul to him on the spot! My daughter, if you please.

'Bettina,' I told her, 'please don't raise your voice like that.' And then I said to Morten, 'As far as I can see, Morten, you're trying to show us that if someone set out to rob the house next door he would have done it, no matter what. And I must say, I can't see anything to argue with in that.'

He nodded at me very pleased, as I knew he would be. Morten is one of those men who can't abide coming right out with the point of what he wants to say, but must build up to it like somebody building a house, brick by brick. And Bettina's carrying on as she had, left him standing there, so to speak, with a brick in his hand and no place to put it. However, before he could say whatever he was going to say to me Matthew Chaves cut in suddenly.

'There are other motives', he said, 'for someone breaking into the house.'

'Yes?' said Morten.

'An attractive woman,' said Matthew, 'alone in a house ...'

He let his voice trail off, and I didn't even realize what he was driving at until I saw Morten turn red and then throw a hasty glance toward Junie and Bettina and me as if to see how we were taking this.

'Well now,' Morten finally said, very embarrassed, 'that's something to consider in any such case, but I hardly think it applies here any more than robbery, and I'll show you why.'

He turned to Junie, who sat straight up in her chair and looked scared to death. 'When you went into the lady's house', he said, 'to take care of the water heater, did you go in the side door?'

'Yes, sir,' Junie said, so faint you could hardly hear her. 'Was it locked?'

'I have a key,' Junie said. 'Miss Ballou gave it to me.'

'But did you have to *use* the key?' Morten said in such a sharp voice that the poor child looked as if she wanted to break out crying. 'Are you *sure* you had to use the key?'

'Oh, yes. It's such a stiff lock, kind of old-fashioned, and it's an awful lot of trouble. I had to keep twisting at it and rattling the door. . . .'

'This morning?'

'That's what I'm telling you about, Mr Ten Eyck,' Junie said. 'It was worse than ever this morning. I . . .'

Morten cut her off just like that with her mouth open and the words starting to tumble out of it in the way Junie has when she gets wound up. He looked over at us.

'Now', he said, 'we'll go over some more of the picture.' He ticked off points on his fingers. 'There are two doors in the house: the front door was locked and bolted; the side door was locked. All the windows in the house were properly locked with safety catches. I checked each one myself, so I know for sure. But there was someone in the house with the lady, somebody who didn't have to break in, but could walk right in like a gentleman.'

'Or lady,' Matthew suggested very softly.

Morten looked at him very deliberately over his glasses, and you could just see the wheels turning in Morten's head.

'Why do you say that?' he finally asked.

'Because', Matthew said, 'you seem to feel that since whoever did it was strong only a man could be involved. But', said Matthew in his nastiest way, 'I've seen some remarkably strong women in my time.'

‘Yes?’ said Morten with more patience than I would have, I can tell you.

‘A woman out of her mind with anger or fear can be as strong as any man, at least for enough time to do a lot of damage,’ said Matthew. ‘And, my friend, that isn’t just theory.’

Morten thought that over and then looked at Matthew as solemn as an owl. ‘When I’m done here,’ he said, ‘I’ll make it my business to see if any female lunatics have escaped from the local asylum,’ and it was with deep satisfaction that I saw Matthew set his teeth hard and look black as a thundercloud.

Morten shook his head. ‘No,’ he told us, ‘I think we’re safe in saying it was a man, and we can also say it was a man who came into the house one of three ways.’

He held up three fingers to illustrate. One, he was with the lady when she came in. Or, two, it was somebody who knew her so well that when he knocked or rang she would let him in. Or, three, it was somebody who had a key to that side door. Now,’ he said, ‘has anyone here any ideas on which it might be?’

Any ideas? I had been standing at my bedroom window listening to the Jackson Avenue Church toll midnight when that big Cadillac swung into the driveway with its headlights blinding me for the moment. An idea had struck me then, and it was back now as vivid and hard to shake as the glare of the headlights had been.

CHAPTER 4

I OPENED my mouth, but closed it again without speaking. That was all Morten needed before he was on me, quick as a wink.

'You were going to say something, Lucille?'

'No,' I said, and then I said, flustered, 'well, yes. Yes, Morten. I think I ought to say that I was standing at the bedroom window upstairs when Miss Ballou drove in about midnight. And there was a man in the car with her, I am sure there was.'

Morten looked as gratified as if I had poked my finger right into someone's face and said, 'There is the murderer.'

'Do you know him?' he said. 'Who was he?'

And I had to explain that, what with the reckless way the woman swung the car into the driveway, and the way the headlights shone into my eyes when the car bounced up on the curb, it was impossible to make out anything very well. 'But', I said, 'I am positive now there was a man sitting there in the front seat with her. Without a jacket and in his shirt sleeves. I am positive of that.'

'But you have no idea who it was?' Morten persisted.

They were all sitting up straight and staring at me now, all except Matthew Chaves, and he sat back on the sofa cool as a cucumber, a little smile showing on his lips, and his eyes narrow as a cat's while he lit a cigarette. He was wearing one of Richard's sport shirts because he knew I disliked his habit of sitting down to meals in that eternal tee-shirt of his, and while I looked at him the picture of the tee-shirt and the way he lounged there started to blow up bigger and bigger like a bubble in my mind so that I could almost see it getting ready to go pop.

'Lucille,' Morten said, 'I asked you if you had any idea who this man was.'

'Maybe I do,' I said.

Morten looked ready to explode. 'Then who was it!'

Matthew blew out a big cloud of smoke. 'I suppose', he said very softly, 'Mrs Ayres hates to disoblige a guest, but I imagine she is referring to me. Isn't that so, Mrs Ayres?'

‘Maybe it is,’ I said, sickened by him, ‘and I’ll thank you to remember that you were the one to say it.’

‘You mean’, Morten said in a hard voice to Matthew, ‘you were with the lady when she drove in last night?’

‘Does that surprise you?’ Matthew asked.

Morten thought about this, and then shook his head slowly. ‘Mister,’ he said, ‘I don’t know much about you, but from what I do know I can’t say I’m very much surprised. I’m only surprised that you don’t understand what this means or how serious it can be.’

I half expected Matthew to flare up at this, but his voice was calm and controlled.

‘All right,’ he said, ‘I was with Miss Ballou when she drove up. I met her when she came across in the ferry, and she offered me a lift. But I didn’t go into her house with her. We talked a while in the car, and then she put the car into the garage and went into the house alone.’

‘Alone?’ Morten asked, and Matthew said, with a little edge in his voice now, ‘Quite alone.’

‘Well now,’ said Morten, ‘it’s too bad the lady isn’t here herself to verify that. Though, of course,’ he added, ‘if she was, all this wouldn’t be necessary, would it?’

‘If what you’re getting at’, Matthew said, ‘is that it would be better for me all around to suddenly pull a witness out of my hat I suppose I’ll have to oblige.’ He levelled his eyes at Bettina, who sat rigid. ‘Betty, have I been telling the truth?’

I’ve seen pictures in the newsreel of how a crowd looks when it watches a tennis ball hit across the net, everyone’s head swinging around as if they were all hypnotized. And that is how we must have looked there with everyone’s head turning at the same time toward Bettina.

She looked at Matthew and then looked away from him as if hating the sight of him, and finally she said, so that you could hardly hear her, ‘Yes.’

I could imagine Morten’s feelings. He had been going

along very nicely, and now here he was being pulled up short by Bettina again.

‘You mean you saw the lady go into the house alone?’ he prodded, and Bettina nodded her head.

He huffed and puffed away on that pipe of his for a few seconds, and then suddenly said to Bettina, ‘Where were you when this was happening?’

‘In the kitchen.’

‘At twelve o’clock midnight?’

‘I,’ she stopped short and you could see Morten’s suspicions fairly simmer. She cleared her throat. ‘I was hungry. I had gone down for a bite.’

‘And you saw the car come in?’

‘Yes.’

‘And the lady and the young man here, they were talking?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well now,’ said Morten uncomfortably, ‘maybe you could hear what they were saying.’

Bettina sat up sharp at that. ‘I don’t know what they were talking about,’ she said angrily.

You don’t bring up a child for twenty-two years without getting to know her pretty well, and Bettina was never a girl who could tell a lie without having it written all over her.

‘Bettina!’ I said.

The look she gave me was like a slap in the face. ‘Stay out of this!’ she said furiously. ‘Just stay out of this!’

I had barely opened my mouth to tell her what I thought of her carrying on like this when Morten waved his hand.

‘So you didn’t hear what they said,’ he told Bettina. ‘But then what happened?’

‘Matt – Mr Chaves – got out of the car, and Miss Ballou drove it into the garage.’

‘Yes?’

‘Then she came out of the garage, and they talked a little more, and then she went into the house.’

‘Her house?’

‘Yes.’

‘And the young man?’

‘He came into the kitchen. Our kitchen, I mean. I let him in.’

‘Oh?’ said Morten, and gave me a quick look as if warning me, as well he might.

‘I called him,’ Bettina went on in a rush. ‘While they were standing there just before she went in I leaned out of the window and called his name. So he came in.’

Which meant, I saw on the spot, that he must have spent the night right there under my own roof. It wasn’t the first time, of course, but it certainly was the first time he had dared to do it without even a by-your-leave from me. And then I found myself facing the dreadful thought that maybe there had been other times like this, times I hadn’t known about. He was capable of anything, and Bettina had been acting so unlike herself lately that it was hard to tell what she was capable of.

Well, there was no misreading the look on Morten’s face, and no doubt about what was ticking away behind those pale eyes of his, knowing the way he and May brought up theirs. So I quickly said, ‘Mr Chaves is always welcome here, Morten. I told him he could drop in any time he wished,’ hoping Morten would understand the difference between that and a young man’s calmly walking in to be alone with a girl at all hours of the night.

Morten’s expression was that of a man who had been handed some kind of queer new dish to try at the dinner table and doesn’t know whether he should or not.

‘This is all very interesting,’ he said to Bettina doubtfully, ‘but you don’t mind my saying, Bettina, it sounds a little . . .’ He waved his hand around, hunting for a word, ‘A little *neat*. A young man is in a very serious position, and then it turns out here is someone to tell the story which makes

everything good for him.' He leaned forward toward her. 'You know, Bettina, sometimes we think we are doing a favour for someone . . .'

'If you mean that she's lying, Morten,' Harry said suddenly, 'I can tell you that she isn't.'

Morten looked at him. 'No?'

'No. I came home a little after this, and when I put the car away I could see quite clearly that she and Matthew were talking together at the kitchen table. There couldn't be any question about it.'

'Oh,' Morten said, and there was disappointment written all over him. For my part, I was furious at Harry. Rather than let his daughter be accused of a simple lie he had to step in and make sure her reputation would be torn to rags. That was the Ayres way, all right, using a scythe to trim your whiskers.

'Well now,' Morten finally said, 'maybe we can go ahead and look into this from a different angle. We'll let it go now that no one went into the house with the lady, at least so that we know. But maybe we can find out if somebody knocked at the door or rang the bell, and she let him in.'

There was such a silence at this that I could feel it singing in my ears. Morten waited for a long time, and then took a deep breath. 'Then maybe', he said, 'we'll have to go to the last possibility. Somebody could have a key and let himself in. At least one key I know about,' he nodded at Junie, 'and that is the one the lady gave you.'

Junie's eyes opened like a china doll's.

'I never!' she yelped. 'I didn't set a foot out of the house all night! Why, I swear . . .'

'And you had the key with you all the time?'

'If you think I gave that key to somebody, Mr Ten Eyck,' Junie said very indignantly, 'so that he could go out and murder that poor woman, I can tell you I did not! Why, I . . .'

‘Are you the only one who has a key?’ Morten said sharply, and Junie seemed to shrink right down in her chair while I looked at her. No wonder, the way he barked at her.

‘Morten,’ I said, ‘why you expect the girl to be able to answer that, I don’t know. If Miss Ballou felt obliged to give her house key to anyone else that would be Miss Ballou’s business. . . .’

‘Oh,’ he snapped, very sarcastically, ‘maybe I ought to go ask Miss Ballou about it?’

‘If you’re going to act like that,’ I told him, but I was sick inside. In that Dutch stubborn way he had his teeth in something and wasn’t going to let go until he was good and ready.

‘Is there anyone here who knows about other keys to that door?’ he said grimly, and waited.

There was another one of those ear-ringing silences, and then Matthew Chaves reached into his pocket, pulled out a key chain, and slipped a key from it.

‘I have one,’ he said, and held it up. ‘But I don’t suppose I’ll be needing it any more,’ he said, so callously that it would make your blood run cold, and then he tossed the key to Morten.

Morten’s jaws set like a trap. He looked down at the key, and then up at Matthew. ‘Interesting,’ he said. ‘Very interesting.’

‘I’ve had it since the first time I visited Miss Ballou last year,’ Matthew said. ‘It hasn’t been used since then.’

‘Do you think I should believe that?’ Morten asked softly.

Matthew smiled that hard little smile. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I think you should believe it. But to tell the truth, I don’t think it matters very much whether you do or not.’

‘You don’t?’ Morten said as pleasantly and politely as if this were just some nice little discussion he was holding. ‘Why not?’

‘Because,’ said Matthew, ‘I think you’re a man who starts with a conclusion, and then fits in the details to justify it.’

In that case, I can't see where one little detail, more or less, is going to bother you.'

Morten's face was beet-red, but he controlled himself admirably.

'Mister,' he said to Matthew, 'sometimes a man feels that people are always stepping on his toes. Sometimes he might even be right about it. But if he's smart he'd know that all he has to do is stop shoving his legs out in everybody's way.'

'I'll bear that in mind,' Matthew said.

Morten paid no heed to that, but held the key up so that we could all see it. 'I would like to know', he said, 'if there are any more of these around.'

My mind was going round and round then like a squirrel in one of those treadmill things. There was another key to Katherine Ballou's door, all right. It was the one on Harry's own key chain, the one I found after I knew how things were between them. And from the look on Harry's face, and the way he was dragging his fingers across his forehead as if to straighten out his thoughts I could tell he was torturing himself wondering what to say or do.

If he had an ounce of the sense every human being is supposed to be born with there wouldn't have been any question in his mind. Just mentioning that key could lead to questions and talk that would spill the whole filthy business into the town's lap, the very thing I had dreaded all these months. Maybe, I thought, if I spoke up and said that she had given me the key to look in on the house now and then while she was away, and I had turned it over to Harry for safekeeping, well, it might steer Morten off that particular track. But then I knew I couldn't. I'd just open my mouth, and Morten might have me so twisted and tangled in a minute that it would be worse than ever. All I could do really was just pray for a miracle that would stop Harry from popping right out with it, and maybe because it was Sunday,

and because the prayer poured right out of my heart with such feeling, the good Lord answered it.

The front door slammed open so hard we all jumped, and Richard walked in looking bewildered and furious.

‘People walking all over our lawn as if they owned it,’ he said, ‘and sitting on our front steps like a town meeting. What’s going on here, anyhow!’ he demanded.

CHAPTER 5

IT was Morten who spoke first before any of us could get a word in. He has always had a great fondness for Richard, even going so far as to tell me once how much he thought of Richard’s good manners and the way he knows his place around adults. It is ironic that he then went on to attribute this to Harry’s good work in bringing up the boy, because if anything marked their relationship it was the fact that with every passing year Harry drew further and further away from his son. Luckily, Richard did not have the sort of high-strung, moody nature that Bettina had, or he might have suffered from this a good deal. As it was, he was always a quiet, placid child, content to be with his books and music or whatever else was his interest of the moment, always a good student, and always conscientious about whatever little household duties I assigned him. What with a household to care for, I never had much time for reading myself, but I was never at a loss to find some little topic to discuss with Richard, or some little adventure to share with him, and, as my sister, Edna, once remarked, ‘Lucky for the boy he’s got someone to play both father and mother to him, Lucille. And a crying shame that Harry is willing to let it go at that.’

Well, a crying shame it was, and even more so that the

time Harry showed consideration for his children had to be when his own guilty secret came out. 'They mustn't know, Lucille,' he told me. 'They mustn't ever know!' As if he had the right to even mention them to me at that moment!

And did he think I'd go right out and blab to them something that made me sick to even think about? If Bettina had not forced me to it she would never have known, and Richard never did know. Would not have known about that woman's death next door, either, if I could have had my say, although that was clearly impossible, what with the excitement stirred up, and with the way Morten was acting up.

'Well now,' Morten said to Richard, 'where have you been all morning?'

'Where?' Richard said. 'Right after breakfast I went for a walk, that's where. And then I went straight to church, but nobody here showed up, so I came back to find out what was wrong. And what *is* wrong?' he demanded of Morten.

So Morten told him. And though it couldn't have taken more than three minutes to tell the whole thing, it could not have sounded uglier. Richard dropped numbly into the chair next to mine, and then got paler and paler as Morten talked so that I was sure he was going to faint away right at my feet.

'Dick,' I said to him, 'if you'd go right upstairs . . .'

'No,' he said, and turned to Morten. 'But there was a strange man outside Miss Ballou's side door last night,' he said. 'And I know, because I saw him.'

Morten's eyes lit up. 'A strange man?' he said eagerly. 'You saw him?'

'I was in the garage. My record player broke down so I went to get some tools and stuff to fix it with, and while I was hunting around for them I heard some footsteps right outside. When I looked out I could see somebody, a man, right by Miss Ballou's side door, monkeying around with it. So I stepped out and just started to say something to him . . .'

‘Who was he?’ Morten said impatiently, and Richard shook his head.

‘I don’t know. He just took one look at me and ran. Left me standing there wondering what it was all about. Then I took a look at the door to see if he had broken it open or anything, and it was all right. The only thing to notice was that a note was shoved into the door, but I figured it was none of my business so I left it alone.’

‘Did he put the note there?’ Morten asked.

‘Maybe he did, but I couldn’t say for sure. It was dark, around ten o’clock, and I couldn’t see what he looked like or what he was doing very well. All I could see was that he was big, and that he could run like a streak. I’m a good runner, Mr Ten Eyck, but just watching the way he took off I knew there wasn’t a chance in the world of getting near him, so I didn’t even bother.’

‘And thank God for that,’ I told him.

Morten suddenly snatched up the piece of paper he had laid on the floor with the other stuff when he first sat down.

‘But could this be the note you saw in the door?’ he demanded, holding it up.

Richard frowned. ‘I don’t know, Mr Ten Eyck. I don’t see how I could tell for sure. I didn’t read it, or look at it very closely, and from where I was I guess one piece of paper would look pretty much like any other piece of paper.’

Morten shoved the paper at him. ‘Here,’ he said, ‘you read it now. Maybe something about it, maybe the handwriting, will tell you for sure who wrote it.’

Richard studied the paper carefully, and then shook his head. ‘I’m sorry, Mr Ten Eyck, it doesn’t mean a thing to me.’

Morten looked disappointed, and then, as if a startling thought had hit him, turned to Matthew.

‘You say you saw the lady go into the house. Was this

paper on the door then? Did you see her take it out of the door when she went in?’

‘I wasn’t near that door,’ Matthew said. ‘I told Miss Ballou good night in the middle of the driveway.’

Morten took the note from Richard and handed it to Matthew. ‘Or maybe,’ he said grimly, ‘you know this handwriting?’

Matthew barely looked at it, and shrugged. ‘It isn’t mine,’ he said.

‘Then pass it around,’ Morten said sharply, waving his hand toward the rest of us. ‘And I ask you all, please, if you have any idea who wrote it, say so right out.’

Harry glanced at the note as quickly as Matthew had, shook his head, and held the paper out to me. It was cheap paper, and looked as if it had been torn carelessly out of a pad. The bottom edge was ragged, and the two lines of writing on the sheet were done in a clumsy, backhanded script that looked as if it were dug right into the paper.

You said not later than tonight, I read, so I have been calling you. I will be back again.

The queerest thing was that while it was not like any handwriting I would recognize on the spot, it was somehow familiar to me. I stared at it until it swam before my eyes, and I racked my brain trying to think of some other piece of paper with writing like this, but it just wouldn’t come.

‘Morten,’ I said, ‘I am positive I know who wrote this.’

‘Who?’ he rapped out.

‘I just cannot recall,’ I told him. ‘And the aggravating thing is that it’s on the tip of my tongue.’

‘Lucille, if you would just think hard . . .’

‘I *am* thinking hard,’ I said with some annoyance. ‘If you imagine I’m not as anxious as you are . . .’

‘Yes, yes, of course, Lucille,’ he said quickly, and then pulled the paper from my hand and gave it to Bettina.

'Bettina, if your mother knows, maybe you would know, too.'

Bettina looked at the writing and frowned, and I could almost see the same worrisome thoughts going through her head that were in mine. 'I'm sorry, Mr Ten Eyck,' she said, 'the writing is familiar, and yet I can't place it.'

'If we waited a little bit while you looked through letters and such things people wrote you,' Morten pleaded, 'you think that would help you remember?'

While all this was going on Junie, of course, was bouncing with impatience. 'Mr Ten Eyck,' she chimed in, 'I haven't seen that yet. Maybe I could tell you,' and just like that she fairly snatched the paper from Bettina's hand and looked at it.

It was the expression on her face that put me right the instant I saw it. Her eyes opened wide, and then the colour drained from her cheeks so that she looked the image of death. She looked wildly around at us, and I think she knew what I was going to say because she threw up her hand as if to stop me.

'Morten,' I cried out, 'it was Bob Macek who wrote that!'

'It doesn't mean anything!' Junie yelled. 'It's only about a delivery or something. It doesn't mean anything at all!'

'It was Bob Macek,' I said, trying to make myself heard over her, 'and I know because that's the writing that's on my butcher bill every blessed week of the year!'

Morten knew Bob Macek, all right. I doubt if there was a man in town who followed the baseball games more closely than Morten, or worried about them more.

'Are you sure, Lucille?' he demanded.

'I will take my Christian oath on it,' I said.

Junie was in tears by now with Bettina trying to comfort her, but Morten had no time for nonsense.

'Listen to me, miss,' he barked at Junie, 'what are you to Bob Macek, anyhow?'

Junie tried to get hold of herself. 'I'm engaged to him,' she blubbered. 'We're going to get married!'

'Oh,' Morten said, and looked uncomfortable. 'Well now,' he said, 'you must see what a serious business this is. A young fellow leaves a note and runs away. Then the lady is found dead with the note right there, and it says in the note that the young fellow was going to be back. Maybe you can see this is nothing to laugh about.' Which is something Morten could have spared himself saying since Junie was far from laughing.

She took a long shuddering breath, and glared at Morten. 'If you think Bob had anything to do with this, Mr Ten Eyck,' she said, 'you're crazy.'

Morten shook his head. 'Before I can be as sure as you are, young lady,' he said, 'I'll have to do some talking with our friend, Bob.' He turned abruptly to Richard. 'Richard,' he said, 'do you think you could identify the man you saw running away as Bob Macek?'

Richard hesitated. 'I don't know.'

Morten shrugged. 'Well now,' he said, 'if your father doesn't mind I'd like you to take out the car and drive me over to our friend's house.'

'It's all right with me, Morten,' Harry said.

Junie pulled herself away from Bettina. 'If you're going to see Bob now I'm going with you, Mr Ten Eyck.'

'I'd rather not,' Morten said.

'I don't care what you'd rather!' Junie flared. 'I'm going.'

She did, too, and when the three of them had gone the rest of us just sat there looking at each other in that living-room which was one reeking cloud from those cigarettes Matthew smoked one after the other. I got up to draw back the curtains and let the air circulate a bit, and, sure enough, there on the walk up to the porch were at least a dozen of the neighbourhood busybodies - Mort Bennauer, Rose and Howie McIntyre, Freda Lutey, and the Youngs, no less,

from around the corner with some of their picked friends.

‘Harry,’ I said to him, ‘I think it would be in order if you went out and told those people to stop making a show of themselves right in front of our house.’

He shook his head. ‘I’d rather not, Lucille,’ he said. ‘You take care of it.’

It needs a little gumption, Lucille, to go out there and face them, so you do it. Well, that was Harry for you, all right, an Ayres through and through. And, as I thought to myself on the way out, there never was one of the Ayres breed who had a backbone, or ever will.

PART THREE · *Harry*

CHAPTER 1

THE first time we met was on a day like this, a glowing Sunday morning with the breath of early summer in the air, and I was in the driveway trying to get down on canvas a view of the street. The houses on either side of the driveway made fine incisive lines against the sky, there was a loop of telephone wire bridging the roofs of the houses, and the fresh green of trees and lawn under the sunlight softened the rigid pattern of lines and gave it depth.

But I was not doing it justice, I knew that, and I was not made any happier when I realized that someone had come quietly up behind me and was standing there examining my work. Self-assurance was never one of my strong points, and what little I had to sustain me in a hobby at which I was making no progress always vanished like a puff of smoke at the mere idea of anyone's peering over my shoulder and working up to some nonsensical comment. And, knowing the weakness of my work, I was always more disconcerted by the kind remark than the antagonistic one. Lucille's 'Why, that's lovely, Harry. So lifelike,' delivered like a pat on the head, was most disconcerting of all, and with the idea that it was she who was standing there I waited with brush poised for the blow to fall.

Instead, I was dumfounded to hear a woman say, 'Not bad for illustration, Mr Ayres.'

I turned to face her, and that was the first time I ever saw Kate Ballou. And it was the way I always see her most vividly in my mind's eye, a look partly quizzical and partly apologetic on her face as if she had suddenly been made aware that she might have offended me and was not quite sure how to make amends. Then she must have seen that she had not offended me, but only given me a surprise.

'I'm Kate Ballou,' she explained. 'When I bought the

house here and told the agent I was a professional painter he said something about your interest in painting. That is, he said something about Mr Ayres' interest in painting, and you are Mr Ayres, aren't you ?'

'Yes,' I said, and I found it impossible to take my eyes from her face, 'I'm Harry Ayres.'

I already knew from Lucille's animated talk at the dinner table that the house next door had been bought by some woman from New York, some kind of artist from what Lucille had been able to gather, and I knew from the presence of the expensive car that had taken its place in the garage next to our old sedan that whoever the woman was she had money enough and to spare. But I was not prepared for anything like Kate Ballou. She was beautiful, true, but more than that, there was an apparent obliviousness in her to it. A good-looking woman is not a rarity; a good-looking woman who does not act every waking moment as if her looks were the alpha and omega of her existence most certainly is, and before I knew Kate Ballou I think Bettina was the only attractive woman I knew who had that quality of unawareness. In Bettina, however, it was carried far past a healthy point, as was made evident by her refusal to take pains with her appearance, and her agony at any sort of compliment. Kate, I think, had the sort of indifference which is rooted in a supreme self-confidence, as if at one time she had coolly studied herself in a mirror, come to an absolute conclusion about herself, and there let the matter drop. She did not in any way seem to mind the stupid way in which I stared at her, but had an air of accepting this as an inevitable part of our introduction. When I realized I had been examining her in much the same way one would examine a new model who has taken a pose for the first time before a life class, I grew warm with embarrassment.

'I'm sorry,' I managed to say, 'but I couldn't help thinking what a fine subject you'd be for a portrait. I mean,' I added

hastily, with a dreadful consciousness that in attempting a graceful bow of apology I was tripping over my own feet, 'for some artist who knows how to paint. I'm afraid I'm a Sunday painter of the poorest sort myself.'

True as this was, anyone else I knew would have contradicted it for politeness sake, and I was a little hurt that she did not. Instead, she studied my painting gravely, and then shook her head.

'There's no reason why a Sunday painter has to be a bad painter,' she observed.

I sought some balm for my wounded feelings. 'You said it was good illustration,' I pointed out, 'so it can't be all bad.'

'It's details,' she said impatiently, 'all details. See, this bush here, and this one, and this line of wire, and the house here; all a collection of details, and even though you've set them down so nicely they don't add up to anything. You've missed the whole thing.'

I thrust my brush into her hand. 'Very well,' I said, 'you go ahead and show me what I've missed.'

In my own defence I must say that only part of the gesture was sophomoric challenge based on hurt feelings. The other part, small as it might have been, was an honest desire to be shown, to have the secret revealed, to be handed the magic key. In that, I daresay, I was no different from any hopeful amateur who dares try his hand at any of the arts, painting or writing, or what have you. In all of us, I think, is the feeling that there is a magic key, and that one day while we are bumbling ineffectually at our picture or poem or music it will be delivered miraculously into our hands, and thenceforth we will do as the successful ones do. And you cannot stop us from believing that, either, for if you do there is really nothing left.

I think Kate Ballou understood this. For a moment she held the brush as if she were about to thrust it back into my hand, then abruptly said, 'I never could resist playing

teacher. 'Now, if you'll give me something to demonstrate on ...'

'Use my canvas,' I said. I had expected her to do that, anyhow.

'No,' she said, 'no one has any right to touch your picture.'

'It's not a very good picture,' I smiled. 'Anything you do to it is bound to be an improvement.'

'It's yours,' she said stubbornly. 'Don't you see, if someone just draws a single line on it it stops being yours.'

It was not a compliment. It was not intended to be one. It was a simple statement that something I had done, something I had tried to do, at any rate, was important, was to be respected because it was a reflection of myself. Good, bad, or indifferent, that canvas was a mirror for Harry Ayres, and no one had the right to step in the way of his image. A heady thought, an amusing and bewildering one, after twenty-three years of marriage with Lucille.

So Kate Ballou did not paint over my canvas, but used, prosaically enough, a cardboard shirt stiffener which she salvaged from the rubbish box next to my kitchen door. She set it into the easel, and then, after carefully preparing brushes and palette, went to work with short savage strokes that seemed to dig the paint into the cardboard. The picture grew before my eyes: a tunnel of cool darkness running between the cliffs of two houses and suddenly plunging into a molten puddle of sunlight. A dark road inexorably leading to a world that shimmered under sunlight. You would go down that road and want to retreat and then follow its course again. It was a very good picture.

I told that to Kate Ballou, and she nodded. 'You see,' she said, 'the details are submerged in favour of the total impression. In illustration it's just the opposite.'

I looked at my canvas which leaned sadly against the

base of the easel. 'I suppose', I said ruefully, 'that the logical step is for me to offer my work to some suitable magazine.'

She smiled. 'Is that what you really want out of your painting?'

'I don't know what I want out of it,' I admitted. 'You'd probably laugh if I told you how I came to start painting in the first place. . . .'

'How?'

'If you promise to keep a straight face.'

'All right, I promise.'

'I own a store here,' I explained. 'Ayres' House Supplies on Ewald Street downtown. Hardware, paints, and what will you to make the House Beautiful. And then one fine day I noticed we were getting a lot of calls for artists' supplies, and not only from summer people but from local talent you'd never suspect of artistic yearnings. So, we laid in a line of artists' supplies, and since I'm a merchant who boasts of standing behind his merchandise I decided to see how good they were.'

'Were they good?' she asked solemnly.

'Very good,' I said. 'A lot better than my talent for using them, as I found out quick enough, but since I got so much pleasure from them . . .'

I stopped short. I had not meant to start maundering like that, to spread my private emotions like jelly on bread and hand them to her, but I had been tricked into it by her manner, that appearance of humorous interest, as if what I had to say was in any way important. Trust her to somehow understand this.

'Do you think it's something to be ashamed of?' she asked.

'What?' I said, deliberately obtuse.

'Finding something by accident and then making use of it because it gives you pleasure.'

'My wife seems to think it all a little childish,' I said. 'I'm afraid she may have a point there.'

I think I had expected her to argue against this; I was disconcerted when she took it at face value. 'Then why don't you give up painting? You're right about these materials, these brushes and paints, everything; they're the best money can buy. Do you think you have the right to use them, feeling the way you do?'

'Since I own them,' I said, 'I think I have every right to do with them as I please.'

She shook her head. 'Then it's my unpleasant duty, Mr Ayres, to tell you you're quite mistaken. Before you have the privilege of sticking this brush into that pigment you have to have two things clear in your head. One is a respect for your art, and the other is a respect for yourself. I'm a little fed up with a lot of the amateurs that have come waltzing into my pet preserve lately, the precious primitives whose only asset is ignorance, and God help them if they lose that, and the crackpots who throw confetti on glue, and the club ladies who think painting is, oh, so precious.' She waved the brush under my nose. 'This is the stuff that Vermeer used, and El Greco, and Cézanne, and a lot of other people who knew what it was meant for. And I'm electing myself a delegate on their behalf to ask anyone who doesn't know what it means when he picks up a brush and faces a nice clean piece of canvas to please leave the room.'

I was trapped in a false position, I was being lectured like a schoolboy in a fashion that had both my dignity and temper teetering precariously, and yet in that moment I felt more wonderfully triumphant than I can ever recall. All the things being said to me were exactly the things I had vaguely framed in my mind again and again and never been able to deliver to Lucille. Just hearing them said, knowing there was someone who shared them with me, even though she stood pink-cheeked and angry before me evidently pre-

pared to resist anything I had to say, filled me with the electric sense of having met an affinity. And underneath it all was more, was something that had to be pushed aside and concealed by a conscious thought. *For God's sake, Harry Ayres, went the thought, you're forty-six, you're married, you have two children near marriage themselves. For God's sake, Harry Ayres, watch yourself.*

'Miss Ballou,' I said, 'have you ever given lessons in painting?'

She was taken aback for an instant, and then her mouth quirked in the flicker of a smile.

'Why?' she asked. 'Was I making noises like an art teacher just now?'

'Now you're doing what you warned me against,' I pointed out. 'Showing a lack of respect for yourself.'

She laughed and jabbed the handle of the brush into her chest. 'Bull's-eye,' she said. 'As it happens, Mr Ayres, I did give lessons long, long ago when I was young and defenceless.'

'Well, would you consider taking on a student now? Whatever hours are convenient and whatever payment you think is fair, of course.'

'You're trying to prove to me that I've misjudged you, aren't you?'

'I'm trying to prove something to myself, Miss Ballou.'

She looked at me steadily, and then abruptly nodded her head just once in a queer, stiff gesture of approval. 'You know, that was very well said.' She placed the brush in its box, and picking up a rag from the pile on the ground she slowly started wiping her fingers free of oil.

'That was very well said,' she repeated almost abstractedly, and looked at me, frowning a little.

CHAPTER 2

I DID not know at first how deeply and hopelessly I was involved with her. After all, the figure that eyed me from Hibbard's window whenever I passed it on my way to the store was only that of Harry Ayres – good old Harry Ayres. Not Casanova, mind you, not even one of the second-rate idols that Junie worshipped once a week at the Orpheum. Just Harry Ayres who was getting pretty grey on top, who was always a little too long and lean, and was, perhaps, a little slow on the uptake.

And he lived on Nicholas Street, this Harry Ayres, where all the nice people lived their nice lives without ever being bothered by wild and weird thoughts of beautiful red-headed women. Of course, he did take lessons in painting from a beautiful red-headed woman, but they were oddly formal little lessons. Always in the bright sunlight, and always right out in the open where the neighbours could see for themselves how nice and proper everything was. And they came right up to see, trust them for that, but all they found out was that the red-headed woman was not only beautiful, but smart, and a mighty fine painter who did all those magazine covers, and even had pictures in a couple of museums. And she made money at it, too, lots of money, which even to Nicholas Street made it as respectable as the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.

They didn't pay much attention to me as long as she was around, and after awhile they left her alone, too.

'Which means,' as I told her, 'you are now accepted. Part of Nicholas Street, one and indivisible, till the day you die.'

'You make it sound pretty grim and awe-inspiring, Mr Ayres. There isn't any oath of allegiance to take, is there?'

'To some of the citizens of Sutton, Miss Ballou, it *is*

grim and awe-inspiring. Humble though he may seem to the naked eye, the Nicholas Streeter walks the Plaza like royalty.'

'I'll try to live up to that, Mr Ayres.'

But she wouldn't have to try very hard. Men straightened up and took off their hats for Katherine Ballou too readily for that. And that thought lingered in my mind just long enough to make me utterly ruin a section of canvas that needed the lightest and most careful touch.

It was Matt Chaves who finally lifted the curtain on the part of Harry Ayres I hadn't known about. Not by anything he said, although Matt with his propensity for brutal frankness might not have minced words had he known of the situation then, but by merely making his entrance into the scheme of things.

Bettina glowed in a way unusual for her as she introduced him, and his first words to me were, 'You're taking quite an interest in painting, aren't you, Mr Ayres? Kate Ballou's been telling me about it.'

I was shocked at the sick grinding of jealousy in me when he said that. Somehow, I had never really thought of Kate as part of any world but Nicholas Street, and though I knew she spent several days each week in New York I had chosen to think of those days as being devoted to 'business' in the abstract. The recognition that, of course, there were people in New York – men – with whom she talked, dined, shared her thoughts, shared, perhaps, more than that, was driven into me like a knife. And smiling pleasantly at Matt Chaves, one of those men, I could have killed him on the spot.

'Yes,' I told him, 'I've been doing a lot of painting lately. But I'm surprised to hear Miss Ballou thinks it's worth mentioning. It's not very good, you know.'

'I don't know,' he said, and from his cool regard of me and his slight smile I got the uncomfortable feeling that he

was looking right into me. 'I'd like to see some of your stuff and judge for myself.'

'The pictures are in the attic,' Bettina suggested. 'How about going up there right now?'

'No,' I said shortly. Then I realized how that sounded and tried to soften it. 'If you're ever back in Sutton, Mr Chaves, and happen to visit us again, I'll arrange a private showing.'

'I'll be back,' he said.

I saw Kate the next evening although I had not intended to. I had been given an abrupt insight into my feelings for her, and I was frightened at what I saw. The best thing, I had decided, was to come to terms with myself, to realize that what was perfectly in order for Matthew Chaves or for any other unattached man who might know Kate Ballou was out of the question for Harry Ayres. The lessons would have to stop – it would not be difficult to bow out of them – and the nice balance of things restored.

It was not hard to come to this decision. I have always been contemptuous of the married man who finds himself involved in some fantastic liaison which stands to cost him his home, his family, and his position in the community, because I never felt the game was worth the candle. The average man works too hard to build his life into a respectable structure to have it kicked apart by a whim.

I was fortified by all this when I drove my car into the garage that evening and saw the Cadillac there, a sure sign that Kate was at home. Then I heard her footsteps briskly approaching the garage, and found myself sick with anticipation and strangely angry at her, at myself, at the whole world around me. I snapped off the ignition of the car, climbed out, and then slammed the door behind me so hard that I thought for a second the window would shatter. Kate walked in as I was running my thumb along the glass.

'Hello,' she said casually, 'anything wrong?'

'No,' I said. 'When I slammed the door I thought I might have broken the glass, but no harm done.'

'I heard that door. Sounded as if you were working off a lot of steam, mister.'

'No,' I said. 'It's just that it sticks sometimes.'

'The perversity of mechanical objects. I had a breakdown outside Peekskill, and I just sat there like a bump on a log for four hours until they fixed it. Four beautiful hours out of my life while two solemn men hunted around for the casket or gasket or something.'

'Gasket.'

'Doesn't matter what you call it. I stand by my conviction that all this stuff you see under the hood is just to make it mysterious and expensive. Truth is, when a car is all put together in the factory they just wind it up with a key, and it'll go until it runs down. Bring it to a garage and all they do is rewind it. It's a billion-dollar conspiracy.'

We stood facing each other in the shadowy garage so near that I could have reached out and touched her. And it seemed to me that although she spoke lightly and easily there was a trace of breathlessness in it.

'You sound upset about something,' I said.

'That damn delay in Peekskill. I was so sore about it that I came shooting right up to the house here without even remembering to buy something to eat. Now I have to take time out and go shopping, and I am not the type who takes kindly to shopping.'

'If that's what it is I don't see why you can't come over and eat with us tonight.'

She shook her head. 'No, I couldn't really. Thanks for the invitation, but I have to get the shopping done sooner or later. It might as well be now.'

She slid behind the wheel of the Cadillac, and from the way she sat poised I knew she was waiting for me to walk out of the garage and get clear of the car. And I had every

intention of doing that, I can swear I did, but then I turned almost wildly to her and spoke to her as I never had before.

'Kate,' I said, and my heart was in it, 'who is this Matthew Chaves?'

She showed nothing in her reaction that I might have expected, neither surprise nor annoyance nor amusement. She answered me as if I had every right to speak as I did.

'He's just a friend, Harry,' she said.

'Is he the one you see when you go to New York? I mean, is he in charge of your work there, or something?'

She sounded surprised. 'Of course not. Matt's strictly circulation department. What would he have to do with my work?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I really didn't know what kind of work he did. Bettina said something about his being on a magazine, and I just got the idea that he worked with you.'

'Oh.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I don't know why I'm standing here cross-examining you like this. It's none of my business, really, and I think you've been decent not to just tell me that in so many words.' I turned away from her. 'Meanwhile I won't hold you back from your shopping any longer.'

I had taken one step toward the garage entrance when she said, 'Harry,' and the way she said it stopped me and turned me slowly around in my tracks. 'Harry, Matt Chaves called me last night when he got back to New York. He wanted to give me hell for not being here when he came up, although he should have had sense enough to get in touch with me before he started. And he said he met you and talked to you. Harry,' she said, 'what did Matt say I told him about you?'

'Something about my painting. I didn't talk to him very long.'

'He didn't say anything else? You're sure of that?'

'Of course I am.'

'You're not just being gallant, are you, Harry? I couldn't stand that. I can forgive you a lot of bad painting, but I'd never forgive you for being gallant at the wrong time, Harry.'

'I'm not, Kate. And to prove it, I'd like to know what you've been telling him about me.'

She didn't answer. And in the silence of the garage I could pick out a series of noises from outside: the clatter of dishes in the kitchen where Junie would be at work, the hiss of brakes on the Jackson Avenue bus as it pulled up to the Nicholas Street stop, noises that were the only things measuring off the time while we looked at each other in the shadows there.

Then she said lifelessly. 'It's nothing, Harry. Nothing I'd care to have you know.'

'Your friend Matt knows.'

She reached her hand out to the rear-view mirror and twisted it impatiently to a new angle.

'I don't know what it is about Matt Chaves, Harry. I can go along thinking my own thoughts, keeping my worries to myself, figuring that if something has to be worked out I'll do it my own way sooner or later. Then I sit down with Matt, and before I know it I'm turning myself inside out for him. Telling him things I have no right to tell him, and he has no right to know. And all the while I'm talking to him I know that damn brain of his is ticking away, working out some kind of wild solution that would only blow up right in my face. Did you ever know anybody like that, Harry?'

'No,' I said, 'I never did.'

'Then you're a lucky man, mister.'

'I am?'

'Yes, because afterwards I worry myself sick wondering just what he'll do or say without my knowing it. When he called me at the studio last night and told me he had spoken to you I didn't know what to think. I asked him what he had told you, and he said nothing, he had just passed the

time of the day. That should have been enough, Harry. I've never known him to tell a lie yet. But it didn't stop me from worrying. I guess there are some things you just don't want people blabbing around.'

'I guess there are,' I said.

She nodded brightly. 'So you see, Harry, it was only I was afraid Matt had talked out of turn. As long as he hasn't it's best we leave things just as they were.'

'Kate,' I said, 'you weren't really going shopping, were you?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that right now you probably have a houseful of groceries. I mean that all this stuff about the car's breaking down and your forgetting to go shopping, all of it was just made up on the spur of the moment, wasn't it?'

'As it happens, I did have a breakdown outside Peekskill.'

'You were waiting to talk to me, Kate.'

Her hands were limp on the steering-wheel. She stared straight ahead refusing to meet my eyes.

'Harry,' she said, 'why don't we leave well enough alone?'

I nodded. 'All right,' I said, 'but before we do I want you to answer one question.'

'Yes?'

'I'm sure it's what you told Matt Chaves, and I have a right to know it, too. Kate, how do you feel about me?'

She sat like that for a long while, and then she turned slowly toward me. 'I love you, Harry,' she said evenly. 'I'm so damn deep drunk in love with you that I'm ashamed of myself.'

I had known before she spoke what she would say. Yet the words struck me with the impact of a wave that whirls you around and leaves you blinded and bewildered when it recedes. And I had been blind all along. Not with the blindness of vanity, God knows, but with its exact opposite.

She must have misread my reaction. 'I'm not a complete

fool, Harry,' she said humbly. 'I told you I was ashamed, and I meant it.'

'Ashamed!' I exploded. 'For God's sake, Kate, what do you think's been on my mind day and night for the last month! Why do you think I asked you about Matt Chaves! Just the thought that you might be interested in some man, any man but me, was driving me crazy. Only, I never thought, I never knew you could feel the same way about me.'

'Why not?' she said defiantly.

'Kate,' I said, 'I'm forty-six years old. A respectable gaffer of forty-six. And there's nothing about me that hides a year of it.'

'Harry,' she said mockingly, 'I'm thirty-one years old. Old enough to know what I want.' She suddenly reached out her hand so that it rested, warm and hard, in mine, and I felt her nails digging into my palm. 'It's knowing I can't have it that hurts, Harry.'

The sun was low behind the roofs of the houses across the street now, and it spilled a long tongue of red along the driveway and into the garage almost to my feet. I would walk into it, and then turn away from it into my kitchen. Junie would be there, and Lucille wheedling and pampering her at her work because no other girl worked so hard for so little money on Nicholas Street. And I would turn into the dining-room where my son and daughter would have little to say to me, or nothing, because what they had to say was reserved for their mother. After dinner I would read the paper, touch up a painting, and if anyone else was present in the room exchange small talk with Lucille. I would be the perfect loving husband, and Lucille would be the perfect loving wife, like the two figurines on top of a wedding cake. That is, if someone else was present.

Then I would check the neat little water heater in the cellar, a gas heater because Lucille disliked the kind of

coal burner they had next door in 159 which might smudge the floors, and I would lock the doors and climb upstairs and get into bed with Lucille. We didn't need a sword between us. We had the ever-present contempt she felt for me to serve instead.

I thought of that, and I said, 'I've never had much use for the man who comes crawling to some woman to tell her his wife doesn't understand him.'

'You aren't doing that.'

'No,' I said dryly, 'I'm afraid Lucille understands me almost too well.'

'Do you love her, Harry?'

'No,' I said, 'I hate her. But that's all right, because she feels the same about me. Or I should say, I came to hate her because she hates me. And it struck me that I'm getting a little tired of it.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that I'm curious to know what it feels like to love someone, and to have someone love you. That I think it would be worth anything I'd have to pay for it if you were the one.'

She turned her head away abruptly.

'Kate,' I said in bewilderment, 'if I've said anything . . .'

She shook her head furiously, then pulled her hand free of mine and fumbled in the glove compartment on the dashboard until she found a small, crumpled handkerchief. I watched her helplessly as she dried her eyes and blew her nose heartily.

'Damn fool,' she said in a muffled voice, and pointed to herself. 'Me.'

'Why?'

'I didn't know people could still talk like that, Harry. And I certainly never thought I'd be lucky enough to ever hear anyone talk like that to me.'

'But it's true, Kate. I meant every word of it.'

‘Why do you think I was crying, Harry?’

‘Kate,’ I said, ‘now that we know how things stand would you want to meet me in New York? I have to go to the city to do some buying this week. Do you think we could meet there?’

She nodded. ‘Anywhere, Harry, and any time.’

‘But in Sutton things will have to stay the way they always were, Kate.’

‘If that’s the way you want it, Harry.’

‘It’s better that way,’ I said. ‘My God, I’m even afraid to kiss you right here in our own garage, and yet I’m damned if I leave without doing it.’

‘Damned if you don’t, and damned if you do,’ she laughed, and turned her face up to mine. Her lips were warm and demanding, and then she drew away.

‘You don’t have to worry about wiping off the lipstick,’ she said. ‘I’m not wearing any.’

CHAPTER 3

THERE is a widespread opinion, I know, that in a small town it is impossible to keep a secret. Small-town people live only to poke and pry into their neighbour’s affairs, it is said, and there is always an ear at every door and an eye to every keyhole. One man’s business is every man’s business; nothing can be said or done that is not common property.

I have always felt that there is as much truth to this as there is to any generalization, which is to say, very little indeed. Prying and gossiping are universal faults, and not restricted to any particular place on the basis of its census figures. Wherever you are, when you take up a newspaper you cannot fail to see the eminence to which professional snoops and gossips have been raised. And more than that,

you will discover that the victims of this gossip are not really victims at all. They take pride in what is being said about them, they luxuriate in it, they beg for more of the same.

I think that is the key to the matter, and it applies to Sutton as it does to New York or any other city on the map. Sutton has had its scandals, its extra-marital affairs, its blasted reputations. And in one case after another, I realized, the secret became known only because one of the people involved wanted it to be. What I could not understand then was why anyone in such a position would be fool enough to want this. In my relationship with Kate I found the answer, or at least part of the answer.

I had never been one to invite or offer confidences; I had learned over the years to keep my enthusiasms to myself, and never found it difficult to do so. Now I found myself charged with a high, fierce excitement. A man would parade some pretty little thing along the street, and I would look at him and think, 'What do you know of women if you do not know my Kate!' An attractive woman dining in a restaurant would look at me as I entered, and then turn away with obvious disinterest, and I found myself bursting to tell her, 'I'm nothing to you, lady, but that doesn't matter. I am everything to Kate.' It was as if a sort of rhapsodical insanity had seized me and was continually urging me to take the whole world into my confidence. Sophomoric, dangerous, so alien to me that I found myself marvelling at it, yet there it was.

But because I never let it overbalance my sense of discretion I remained safe. On Nicholas Street I was good old Harry Ayres; in Washington Square I was another Harry Ayres, and the two had nothing to do with each other. Throughout that autumn, winter, spring, I told myself it was better that way.

It was not hard to make arrangements for this. For some

time before I had met Kate I had been considering the possibility of expanding the store, of adding the line of electrical supplies that had only been a minor part of our stock since the Depression. It would take some financing to do this, it would take a series of meetings with agents in New York, and so my comings and goings were accounted for. Lucille never questioned them; it was enough that I sat down with her now and then and showed her price lists and plans. Not that she understood half of what was being said – her mind was made to order for only small details – but the idea that Ayres' House Supplies might again be the kind of store it was in my father's day tickled her vanity. She discussed it with her friends, dragging it into any conversation in that ponderously casual way of hers, and I think that after a while she actually convinced herself that we would soon be serious competitors of Hibbard's Department Store. Lucille had the gift of self-deception such as no one I ever met or hope to meet.

In New York I still registered at the same hotel I always had, but my real home was that studio on the north side of Washington Square overlooking the Mews. The building itself was an old brownstone, a carry-over from a secure and comfortable age, and its halls were always redolent with a strong smell of wood polish. Each step of the stairway to the studio had its own small, distinctive squeak, and after a while I could tell from within the studio just how far a visitor had progressed up the stairs from the note he struck.

Before she had bought the house on Nicholas Street Kate had rented the entire top floor of the building. Now she had only the studio, a large room with a great north window lighting it, and a good deal of painting and drawing apparatus giving it a business-like air. The only furnishings beside this were a studio couch, a ready-made wardrobe, a dresser, and a few chairs. One of the first things that struck me about the room was the contrast in it; Kate was scrupulously neat

about her painting materials, thoroughly untidy about everything else, and, often as not when I walked in, clothes would be strewn on the floor, the bed would be unmade, and Kate, cheerfully oblivious to the disorder, would be standing at the easel, wearing the man's sweatshirt and slacks that did nothing at all to make her look mannish, and with a peaked tennis cap on her head to add the final incongruous touch.

I worked at my painting in that room, I talked to her there, I made love to her there. And at night I would lie in bed with her sleeping next to me, and the easels in the room standing pale and ghostly like sentinels around us, and I would look out the window and always feel a sickness of fear come crawling in me. Not at what had happened to me, because I could not wish better to happen to any man, but from a sense of time out of hand. It had come too late, there was little time left, and each tick of the watch on the chair next to me was cheating me out of that little bit.

I think that is the surest sign of love, that frigid realization that comes over you now and then when you understand that you cannot always have the one you love close at hand. It was with me every night I spent in that room.

And from that room we went forth on small domestic walks. In Washington Square with children always underfoot, or through Greenwich Village, or up Fifth Avenue with the banners bravely snapping for us. We talked incessantly about everything under the sun, we laughed a good deal, we quarrelled a little. Sometimes I used to mark with surprise how very much there was to say. When Lucille and I were married only a short time there had been long silences between us while I sat desperately trying to think of some topic that would interest her. I rarely did, and I remember coming to the uneasy conclusion that, after all, this must be what marriage is really like, it must be going on in every home in the country, and I was simply not accepting the fact with a good grace.

But I never had any such problem with Kate. She was catholic in her tastes, but completely intolerant of the second-rate. She had opinions on everyone and everything, and, naturally, this led to arguments between us.

I once told her that I wanted to see the outdoor art exhibit where the Greenwich Village hopefuls hung their work on the fences around Washington Square.

‘All right,’ she said, ‘but you’ll have to go alone.’

‘Why?’

‘Because that stuff is an insult.’

‘It’s honest work. You ought to give them credit for at least trying.’

‘It’s not honest work. It takes an honest artist to do that, and if any of those people were honest they’d take a look and know just how bad their stuff is. And then they’d be ashamed to hang it out in public.’

‘The public seems to survive it.’

‘Harry, when you read in the papers that some eight-year-old brat has gotten up and conducted a symphony orchestra what do you think?’

‘I don’t know. I suppose that it’s a pretty good trick.’

‘That’s what you’d think. But there are a lot of people who think, “So, that’s what conducting is! Something an eight-year-old kid can do!” Then when they hear something wonderful about Toscanini they say, “Why, he might even be better than that kid. But then, of course, he’s older.”’

I had to laugh at that, but she stuck to her guns, and I went to the exhibition alone. She was right, of course; the stuff was atrocious. However, I found one young man’s work good, and one painting of his, in particular, exciting. When I told her about it she jeered at me, and then a week later I saw it hanging on her wall.

There was one link between the Harry Ayres of Nicholas Street and the Harry Ayres of Washington Square. Matt

Chaves came to visit Kate in the studio one evening when I was there, and it was the first time we met outside Sutton.

For a moment I didn't recognize him. In Sutton where he was Bettina's regular week-end visitor he always dressed so carelessly that it almost seemed an affectation; now he was wearing a well-cut suit and topcoat which made him look altogether different. But the manner was the same. My qualm of guilt must have showed clearly on my face when I opened the door to him, but he showed no surprise at all. It was only afterward that I realized there had been nothing to surprise him in the meeting.

'Hello, Harry,' he said cheerfully, and walked past me into the studio. Kate and I had been playing cribbage, and she sat tailor-fashion on the couch impatiently waiting for me to pick up my cards.

'Chaves, my little mould of fashion,' she said cordially, 'you are an unwelcome guest. Take what you want, and leave.'

He was frowning at the picture drying on her easel. 'I wouldn't want this,' he said. 'What is it, Kate, gone all out for non-representational art?'

'Matt,' she sighed, 'I'm afraid you're just an old-fashioned boy at heart.'

'At art,' he said. 'And I'm all of that, Ballou. To prove it, I'm inviting you to the Whitney right now. The Hopper show is on, and you'll have a chance to see how a real painter does it. Might pick up a couple of pointers too, Kate.'

'I like Hopper,' I said.

Matt turned to me. 'Do you, Harry? Then, by God, we're in the same club. I'm a Hopper and Sheeler man all the way.'

'Last year it was Soyer and Evergood,' Kate pointed out with evident malice.

'And next year it might be Ballou,' he declared. 'But no

pushing, Kate, you'll just have to wait your turn. You know,' he said to me, 'all artists are alike. In their hearts they all think there isn't a painter living whose best canvas is worth hanging in the bathroom. They might say different, but when you pin them down you'll find the only painter they really admire is someone who's good and dead. Isn't that so, Kate?'

'The hell it is,' Kate said.

'That's a broad statement, Matt,' I put in. 'What about all those schools of painters who flock around some master?'

He grinned at me. 'Oh, I'm sorry, Harry. I forgot you were a painter, too. Matter of fact, Bettina and I were in your attic last Sunday looking at your stuff. You never did get around to showing it to me, you know.'

Not that I cared for his opinion, but I found myself asking, 'What did you think of it?'

'Bad, but getting better. That last one, that still-life set-up, comes close to being good. It looked as if you stopped being afraid of what you could do with paint and really let yourself go in that one. I told Betty I thought it was worth framing and putting on the wall downstairs.'

I felt a pleased embarrassment at this. 'Did Bettina agree with you?'

Kate glanced at Matt. 'I'm sure she did,' she remarked dryly. 'And I'll bet she's also a member of the Hopper and Sheeler club, too, isn't she, Matt?'

'Is there anything wrong with that?' he asked.

She riffled the cards she still held in her hand with a sharp, brittle sound, and then tossed them on the couch. 'No,' she said, 'but if Harry'll forgive me for saying it in front of him I'll tell you what I think, Matt.'

'About what?' I said in some bewilderment.

'About Bettina. And about Matt's going there to woo her like some young swain out of the pulp magazines.'

I was completely lost. 'I didn't even know it had gone that far,' I said, 'but now that I do I can't see anything wrong with it. And you know, Kate, I'm speaking as the girl's father.'

'I'm speaking as Matt's friend, Harry. Outside of you he's the only person in the world I give a damn about. And Bettina isn't the girl for him. I know enough about her and her home life to know that although she's old enough to vote and to hold a job she's never grown up. She's a living part of Lucille, Harry, and this tangle Matt's got himself into, trying to change all that, is all wrong. He'll never do it, and if he married her it would be the worst thing he could do. You're her father, Harry, and yet if you took a good, honest look at things you'd find yourself agreeing with me.'

Matt applauded politely. 'Three cheers,' he said. 'Ballou for house mother.'

I tried to smile. 'I must admit it's a strange feeling to sit here and be told things about my daughter's affairs that I should have known long ago. Tell me, have you ever talked to her about getting married, Matt?'

'Talked to her! My friend, I've been proposing marriage to your daughter once a week since the second week I knew her.'

'But she never said a word about it. Never mentioned it to me.'

'She's mentioned it to Lucille,' Kate remarked.

'Oh,' I said, and felt remarkably foolish, 'I suppose she would. And Lucille must have objected.'

'Not objected,' Matt commented. 'I'd say she more or less tabled the matter, and there it lies.'

I shook my head. 'I don't know,' I said slowly. 'I don't understand Lucille's attitude. Maybe if I spoke to her about this . . .'

'It would be more to the point if you spoke to Bettina,

Harry,' said Matt. 'In fact, I've been thinking for some time of introducing you two to each other. I think you'd both be pleasantly surprised.'

'You're making a mistake, Matt,' Kate said. 'I know a dozen girls in New York right now who'd jump at the chance of marrying you. You let me make the arrangements, and I'll come dance at your wedding, Matt.'

'You know I never make mistakes, Ballou,' he said. 'And you'll dance at my wedding on Nicholas Street.'

She looked at me. 'Not I,' she said. 'Who would I have to dance with there, Matt?'

I was a little angry at this, and she knew it. But she only turned to Matt and said, 'All right, Matt, work things out your own way. But for Harry's sake,' and again there was that flicker of an eye my way, 'just remember there are certain things that shouldn't be discussed even with Bettina.'

'I am the soul of discretion, lady.'

'You're an idiot, Chaves,' she remarked, 'but I'm just weak-minded enough to care for you.'

He made a gesture toward the door. 'In that case, how about coming along with me to the Whitney?'

'Harry,' she said, and I looked at her, still angry at her abrupt thrusts, 'what'll it be? The Whitney, or cribbage?'

'I'd like very much to see the Hopper show,' I said.

'All right,' she announced pleasantly, 'then we'll stay and play cribbage. Pick up your cards, Harry.'

Matt hesitated a second and then cheerfully pulled off his coat. 'Well,' he said, 'I guess it's time for me to learn how to play cribbage.'

For all he had been spending almost every week end in my home I had hardly known Matt before this. Now, with my eyes open to the state of affairs, I came to know him very well, and found myself in complete sympathy with him. He would ask Bettina to go out with him in the evening and

she would hesitate, then glance toward Lucille almost involuntarily for a nod of approval before accepting. He would discuss some project he had in mind for her, perhaps the idea of her giving up teaching in Sutton and getting work in New York, and she would desperately fend the subject off. There was no question about her feelings for him – Desdemona swaying toward her Othello – but at the same time their relationship had all the amusing and maddening qualities of a ritual dance, the maiden always moving backward, the man always following her with his hand outstretched, but never quite able to touch her.

When I told this to Kate she said, ‘Do you really think they’ll ever get married, Harry?’

‘Don’t you?’

‘No, I never did. I think that all the things in Matt that attract the girl, all that violence and colour, that whole stallion quality in him, are just the things that would make her scared to death of marrying him. Bettina may be getting the thrill of her life right now, Harry, but when it comes to marriage she’ll settle for a nice proper mathematics teacher and a little vine-covered cottage where they can sit and discuss sabbaticals and pensions.’

‘I’ve watched her when she’s with Matt. She’s so much in love with him that she’s dizzy with it.’

‘Yes, on Saturdays, Sundays, and all legal holidays. But Matt may not want to spend his whole life on a part-time romance, Harry.’ Her lips drew into a small, crooked smile. ‘I can tell him from my experience that it’s got a lot of disadvantages.’

It hurt. There was no denying it hurt. But when that feeling had passed, the important thing left to me was the realization that she was right, and the time had come to settle affairs with Lucille once and for all.

CHAPTER 4

MY father, who lived his life in a series of snap decisions, liked to say that those who looked before they leaped generally wound up never leaping at all, and while his life – and death – was hardly a vindication of this attitude I could see its value in the situation I faced.

But I had inherited little of my father's nature. Instead, I tended to indulge in long, solitary bouts of speculation which might lead to God knows where, but certainly not to any quick action. And faced with the necessity of placing my bomb in Lucille's hands I tried to plan everything like a chess game: what I would say, what she would answer, what I would answer to that, and so on through a whole involved discussion which, somehow, I saw taking shape as one of those neat, formal debates held by college societies. I even went so far as to once take out pencil and paper and figure out financial arrangements for us after the divorce, although I knew when it came to that I would gladly concede everything she wanted in that direction.

What happened to all those days and weeks of cautious planning was, of course, what generally happens in real life. Some small accident sets off the event when you are least prepared for it, and then all your nice planning seems so naïve and inaccurate that you can only feel like a fool when you think back on it.

In this case, the accident was Matt's mentioning that he had left his magazine work in the city to get a job as labourer on the ferry in Sutton. It was a bewildering move even for someone as unpredictable as Matt to make, but when I asked him about it he passed it off with a shrug, and, in the face of my own problem, I let it go at that. And then almost a week later Lucille brought it up without any preliminaries.

She was sitting before her dressing-table stripping the hairpins from her hair with sharp little gestures, and when she first spoke I couldn't understand her through the hairpins in her mouth.

'What?' I said.

She pulled the hairpins from her mouth and planked them down on the dressing-table, looking at me, meanwhile, in the mirror before her.

'I said, I want you to put your foot down, Harry.'

'All right,' I said. 'On what?'

'Don't try to be funny, Harry. It's not called for where your daughter's happiness is concerned.'

That was an old gambit of Lucille's, this business of referring to 'your daughter's happiness' or 'your son's happiness' in cases where, it turned out, the only happiness at stake was Lucille's.

'All right,' I said, 'what's she done to worry you now, Lucille?'

'It's not what she's done, it's what she might do. Harry,' she said in an urgent voice, but still addressing my reflection in the mirror, 'I'm afraid of what this being together with Matthew Chaves is going to lead to.'

'Marriage,' I suggested. 'And I can't see anything wrong with that. It's a respectable state.'

'I asked you not to be funny, Harry.'

I found myself growing angry. 'I'm not being funny. And for God's sake, Lucille, if you want to speak to me you can look right at me and not the mirror when you do it. It's perfectly safe, it won't turn you into stone.'

She wheeled around on the seat, and even while she was speaking furiously her fingers were busily plaiting her hair.

'Do you mean to say you'd approve of Bettina's marrying that man?' she demanded.

'I'd approve of Bettina's marrying anyone in the world she wanted to, as long as he wasn't diseased or criminal.'

Her eyebrows went up triumphantly, 'And what makes you so sure that this high and mighty Matthew isn't a criminal?'

I looked at her, stupefied. 'Now what in heaven's name put a crazy idea like that into your head, Lucille?'

'Crazy?' she said, and looked me up and down. 'Oh, you're so sure of yourself, aren't you, Harry? Always the one with the deep thoughts that are just a little too much for anyone around him to understand. Always the quiet one who sits in the corner and laughs at everyone because they aren't as smart as he is.'

I could feel the little tremors of rage quivering in my arms and legs as always happened when she started to talk like this, and I tried to get a grip on myself.

'Lucille,' I said quietly, 'we've been through this routine too many times before to make it worth repeating. All I wanted was some reason for your saying what you did about Matt.'

'All right,' she flashed out, 'I'll give you one! Did it ever dawn on you that when a man suddenly leaves a good job to go hide himself someplace there must be a reason for it?'

'But there's a dozen reasons why a man would leave a job, even a good job! And as for hiding - if Matt is hiding from anyone he's certainly doing the poorest possible job of it. Listen, Lucille, there's nothing wrong with making melodrama of what somebody might do, but when it comes to charging him with crimes and outrages because you don't like him, even you ought to have more sense than that!'

She smiled, and, upset as I was, I had to marvel at the subtle difference between that vitriolic twist of her lips and the warmth and good nature they would take on when she stepped outside the door where she might meet someone.

'I might have a lot more sense than you imagine, Harry. Enough to call right to that magazine office where he worked, and talk direct to his boss. Mr Morrison. Mr

Wallace Morrison. And he didn't laugh one little bit when he found out I was calling about Mr Chaves!'

'Lucille, that was outrageous. How you could do anything like that. ...'

'Please keep your voice down, Harry. There are other people in the house besides us. Mr Morrison made it mighty clear that your friend, Matthew, had walked out on his job without a by-your-leave, that they were very anxious to get hold of him, and glad I called to help them out. What do you make of that, Harry?'

Truthfully, I didn't know what to make of it, but I knew Lucille well enough to wish that I had been at that phone instead of her in order to make heads or tails of the matter. I told her as much, and her eyes narrowed.

'Then if it means as little to you as that,' she said, 'I suppose his rotten immorality wouldn't mean anything at all?'

I shook my head wearily. 'Immorality. Lucille, why don't you give up and admit it. You might dislike the man for a lot of reasons – he's careless about his clothes, he's not afraid to look you in the eye – but what have crime and morals to do with it? And if he's being immoral, certainly Bettina is being every bit as immoral. It takes two to make that kind of sin, and that's the kind you're talking about, aren't you?'

'Yes,' she said, 'but I'm not talking about Bettina.'

'All right, about whom?'

'About that woman next door. That Ballou woman!'

I was afraid to look into the glass at my own face then. The same sickening wave of jealousy I had known when I first found out how close Matt was to Kate went through me, and it must have drained the colour from my face as suddenly as it turned my knees to jelly and caused me to throw out my hand and catch the edge of the bedstead for support.

'Harry, what is it!' Lucille said.

I steadied myself. 'Nothing. A little sick, that's all. Maybe sick of all this nonsense.'

'Then you don't believe he's carrying on with that woman right under our noses?'

'No,' I said, and meant it. 'I don't.'

'And what makes you so sure of that?'

'I'm sure, that's all!' I cried. 'She wouldn't . . . !'

Lucille faced me rigidly, her hands frozen into the long plain on her chest.

'*She*, Harry?' she whispered, and needed no more than the expression on my face to tell her everything. Her fingers fumbled uncertainly in the plait now. 'You mean, that woman and you . . .'

'I've been meaning to talk to you about it, Lucille,' I said desperately. 'I've been trying to figure out how to put it to you, but I guess I waited too long. I'm honestly sorry it had to come out this way.'

'You and that woman,' she repeated numbly. Then the full understanding of that seemed to dawn on her, and her voice became shrill and violent. 'That was smart of you, wasn't it! You and that woman laughing at me for a fool! Harry Ayres and his whore laughing at me for the twenty-three years I put in being a fool to him!'

I could have hit her then, but when I took a step toward her she held her ground. She knew me too well, knew that what she had said would not only anger me, but would handcuff me with a paralysing sense of guilt, and she was right.

'Lucille,' I pleaded, 'I would have given anything if things could have been worked out without hurting you. But if it can't be done that way, and it's clear enough that it can't, at least let's try not to say and do things we'll both be sorry for afterwards.'

'Sorry for?' She clutched her breast in a drearily familiar

gesture. 'What do I have to be sorry for, Harry? That I married a fool who can't keep away from any slut that happens to look at him twice? Art lessons!' she cried, and her fingers dug into her breast. 'Oh, yes indeed, Harry, you must have learned a lot about art from her. And those trips to New York. Business trips for the tired businessman, weren't they? What am I supposed to do now, Harry? Lie in bed next to you and wonder how many others there were before *her*?'

'You won't have to wonder about that,' I said. 'There's never been anyone but her. There never will be.'

'Never will be?' she echoed, and there was genuine bewilderment in her voice. 'What do you mean, *never will be*? What are you getting at?'

'For God's sake, Lucille, what do you think we've been talking about? I want a divorce.'

That seemed to rock her on her feet. She stared at me, wide-eyed.

'A divorce? After twenty-three years, a divorce?'

'Why not?' I demanded. 'Has being married to me meant so much to you that you can't bear to give it up? Be honest, Lucille. Twenty-three years ago you married the man with the best clothes, the biggest car, the most money in his pocket of anyone on Nicholas Street, where the competition was always tough. Three years later when it blew up in your face you let him know in plain language that he was a dud, a washout, and the biggest disappointment of your life. And there was never a time after that, Lucille, when you changed your mind about that, was there?'

She was very pale, but obviously in control of herself again.

'I'm beginning to understand, Harry. Somehow or other – I don't know where or when or what – but somehow or other I've done you a great wrong. The fact that there's another woman, a cheap, good-looking woman ten years

younger than me, who didn't get grey hairs bringing up your children, that doesn't mean anything. No, somehow I've done you a wrong, and so, bag and baggage, out I go from the house where I've lived twenty-three years!

'Lucille,' I protested, but she cut me off with a rising voice.

'You spoke your piece, Harry, so now you'll hear me out! If I didn't have fifty witnesses to stand by my side right now I might feel different. But there isn't a soul on Nicholas Street who wouldn't bear witness to the kind of wife and mother I've been, although none of them will ever have to. And they won't have to because there isn't going to be any divorce!'

'You're not talking sense, Lucille. For one thing, I never said you'd have to get out of the house. I'll be the one getting out. For another thing, there isn't any answer to all this except divorce, and certainly you have all the grounds you need for it.'

She smiled at me in that sweet and deadly manner of hers.

'Certainly I do, Harry, but we'll just make the best of it, because I still say there isn't going to be any divorce.'

'Even with your knowing about me and Kate Ballou?'

'I told you, Harry, I'll just have to make the best of that.'

I felt like some clumsy animal backed into the corner of a cage with the trainer's whip flicking him unmercifully. And I could swear there was a look on Lucille's face now almost of bland interest in what my next move would be.

'Look,' I said, 'if it's your idea that you're going to block me off by pretending to overlook everything, I might as well explain that there are more ways than one of getting a divorce. The law is a complicated business, and if it's a case of my having to crawl through a loophole to settle this, I promise you that I'll do it, Lucille.'

'I'm not thinking of the law, Harry.'

'Then what are you thinking of?'

'I'm thinking of that woman. Harry,' she said suddenly,

‘do you really feel about her the way you’d have me believe?’

‘I’m in love with her, Lucille.’

‘That sounds very touching.’

‘What do you want me to do?’ I said angrily. ‘Get down on my knees and swear to it?’

‘At your age?’ she jeered. ‘No, I’ll tell you what I want you to do. I want you to forget this divorce business once and for all, Harry, because if you don’t that woman’s life is going to be turned into one hell on earth!’

She was not joking. She was Lucille at her grimmest, and into my head flashed a dozen fantastic pictures of her seeking out Kate, confronting her, badgering her, for all I knew, assaulting her. I couldn’t think of anything to say in the face of that. I could only feel the dead weight of misery pressing me down.

Lucille nodded slowly. ‘I mean that, Harry. I swear it on my children’s lives that if you try to go through with this I’ll make that woman pay a hundred times for it.’

‘I can’t give her up, Lucille!’ I cried. ‘My God, now that I’ve found her – you don’t know what it means.’

‘I didn’t say anything about that, Harry. I was talking about divorce.’

For some strange reason that shocked me more than anything else she had said.

‘You mean’, I said incredulously, ‘that even if I saw her – that if things were the same –’

‘You’d be a fool to do it. Not only because it’s indecent and filthy, but because she isn’t worth it.’

‘But if I did?’

‘You’re to forget this divorce nonsense, Harry. You’re never to mention it again.’

I shook my head in bewilderment. ‘But how could you stand knowing what was going on, and pretending it wasn’t so. I don’t understand you, Lucille.’

‘Don’t you?’ She reached for the plait of hair and began

working at it again, almost abstractedly. 'Maybe that's because you don't know how a woman feels, Harry. It's nice to live in a house on Nicholas Street, but not so nice when you see all the furniture in the house is falling apart. It's nice to hear about the good times Freda and Rose have, and the trips they take, but it's not so nice when you think the farthest you'll ever go is for a ride to New York if your husband ever gets around to asking you.

'Everything that Rose and Freda have I had right in my hands, too, Harry, for a couple of years, and then you took it away because you just plain didn't know how to run your own business. But there's one thing you won't take away. I'm Mrs Harry Ayres, and there's plenty in Sutton, plenty right on Nicholas Street, who are glad to say hello just because of that. What they don't know won't hurt them, and it's not going to hurt me, either. Does that make sense to you, Harry?'

I didn't know then whether it did or not. I could only see that sooner or later I had to bring all this to Kate, and it might mean the end of something I was struggling so desperately to hold on to.

CHAPTER 5

KATE had once wryly remarked on the incongruity of a man's travelling a hundred miles every couple of weeks to meet his next-door neighbour, and that incongruity was never so apparent as during the week which followed. She was at home in Sutton all that week, yet I made no move to see her.

The truth is that while I carried the key to 159 as well as the key to the studio on my chain I had never yet been in the house next door. It is one thing to have the eyes of

Nicholas Street casually turned your way; it would be quite another to thrust the obvious squarely into them, and I even regretted the arrangements Kate had made with Junie to have the stoves tended and an occasional cleaning given the house because it made Junie a sort of uncomfortable link between the two houses. After I knew those arrangements had been made I always felt subtly blackmailed by Junie even while I told myself I had no reason for thinking so.

So I let that week pass, and the day after Kate left for the city I followed her there. It was a miserably hot day, the first one of the summer, and nothing seemed to go right. I was overdressed, and my coat bore me down like an anchor when I left Grand Central. I had not made a reservation at my hotel, and when I got there it seemed to have been taken over from top to bottom by a convention of college instructors, no less, who were as red-faced and drunken and noisy as any set of salesmen on a spree could be. There were no rooms available, sorry, I'd have to look elsewhere, the room clerk told me, and that meant another hour of heat and noise and traffic before I was finally settled.

In expectation of settling my affairs satisfactorily with Lucille I had ordered a ring for Kate several weeks before, a small emerald set into a plain gold band which she had admired in a shop window on upper Fifth Avenue. It cost more than I could afford, but Kate, who could casually buy herself anything she wanted at the drop of a hat, had forced me into the position of either being extravagant or of falling back on the small gift of purely sentimental value. I had not been prepared for Lucille's triumph, the extravagance now reeked of irony, and when I went to pick up the ring the engraving on the band, *Kate and Harry*, left a bitter taste in my mouth.

When I got to the studio it took all my courage to walk up those creaking stairs, and when Kate saw me she read my feelings at once.

‘What’s wrong, Harry?’

‘There’s an unholy stench of turpentine in here, isn’t there?’

‘No worse than usual.’ She threw open the door I had just entered. ‘There, maybe that’ll stir up those old fossils across the hall.’

I dropped into a chair, and she stood over me worriedly. ‘I think the heat’s got you dished. Not used to New York in the summer, are you? Think a drink would help any?’

‘No,’ I said, and gave her the box with the ring in it. She opened it, looked startled, and then slowly and admiringly studied the ring.

‘Harry,’ she said gently, ‘you mean just because I said I liked it – Oh, Harry, this is a fantastic gift for anyone stinking of turpentine like I do right now, but you’ll just have to overlook the smell.’

She leaned over me and put her lips to mine, and for that instant all my misery evaporated under the charge of excitement that touching her could give me. I held her like that until we were both breathless, and when she stood up again I said, ‘Not only rich and good-looking, but the kind of woman who never looks at a gift and says, “You shouldn’t have done it.” What more could a man ask for?’

‘Nothing,’ she said cheerfully. ‘With a paragon like me at his beck and call a man would be crazy to ask for more. Or dead,’ she added meaningfully.

‘Probably dead,’ I agreed. ‘With a palette knife in his back.’

‘As long as that’s understood – ’ She held up her arm with the hand bent back in that gesture women use when they are preening themselves on their jewellery. ‘The only thing you’ve left out, Harry, is the occasion. Something I’ve overlooked? An unbirthday present? There should be some occasion, shouldn’t there?’

So that was it and there was no escape from it. And even

trying to soften it as much as possible in the telling didn't make it any more pleasant. Perhaps it would have been more gallant to omit the explanation of Lucille's chief weapon, her threats against Kate, but I think it would have been the sort of tin-foil gallantry that Kate despised, would have led to a dreary round of explanations and lies none of which could have rung true to her, and so I omitted nothing. When I was done Kate sat there for a long time slowly turning the ring around and around on her finger before she looked up and spoke to me.

'You know, Harry, in her own way she's a remarkable woman. She knows what she wants, she knows how to take it and keep it. And for all my virtues, that's more than I've been able to do.'

'Do you think I was wrong in giving in to her?'

'I think you and I see exactly the same pictures in our heads, Harry. Headlines: *Father Deserts Brood for Love Nest! Redheaded Artist Turns Home-Wrecker!* Oh, yes, and it's Greenwich Village, too, or close enough to it to make it really juicy. And maybe a hysterical woman screaming at you in the hallway, or chasing you right down Fifth Avenue. If you think I'm brave enough or tough enough to face that kind of thing, Harry, you don't really know me. I'd gladly die for you, but it has to be in some way with a little dignity attached to it.'

'Can we go on this way then, Kate?' I only asked that because I wanted some reassurance, but she jolted me by saying, 'I don't know.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean everything's been made so different just by Lucille's knowing. Don't you see, even if she doesn't do anything, she *knows*.'

'But if that's the way she wants it, Kate, why should it change anything between us?'

'Because it does. Because it's like having her right here

in the room with us. And every time we're together she'll be there with us. Don't you see how that changes things?'

'You're making a ghost out of her to frighten yourself with, Kate.'

She shrugged ruefully. 'I suppose all ghosts are just figments of conscience when you come down to it, Harry, but they're still messy things to have standing around leering at you.'

'Then what do you want to do?' I demanded. 'Say good-bye, and call it quits?'

For that instant I took a mean pleasure in the way the colour drained from her face, and then I was furious with myself. 'Kate,' I said, 'I didn't mean it!'

She shook her head. 'I had it coming to me, Harry.'

'Don't talk like a fool.'

'I haven't been talking like a fool, Harry, I've been talking like Lucille. The way I've been acting up now, the way I've been prodding you all along to settle things with her because I wasn't satisfied with what I had, it's so much what Lucille would do if she were in my place that I'm ashamed of myself.'

'Do you think you've been wrong in wanting to get things straightened out? Do you think you're to blame because I made an unholy mess out of them?'

'Don't you understand, Harry? It's not a case of right or wrong, or who's to blame, or anything like that. Maybe there's a little bit of Lucille in all women, Harry. Something that makes them poke and prod their men into decisions they never wanted to make, and then act as if it were the man's fault if things don't turn out right. That's what I've been doing all along. That's why I'm ashamed of myself.'

'You're not being honest with yourself, Kate.'

'Oh, yes, I am. I'm being so honest it hurts. All I could see was that absence didn't make the heart grow fonder, that there were times when I couldn't even think of how

your face looked or what your voice sounded like. Then I'd get scared, and the old Lucille would come out in me. I suppose that's when it comes out in any woman. When she gets scared because there's some damn man to torture herself about.'

I took her in my arms and could feel the rigidity flowing from her. 'Look,' I said, 'you're making me dizzy, arguing back and forth with yourself like that.'

She turned up her face toward mine. 'You do look cross-eyed,' she commented. 'But, darling, I can't say I blame you for that after what you've been through.'

'Cross-eyed or not,' I said, 'I know what I want.'

'It won't be any good with a mess of broken ribs,' she said, but when I released her she pulled me close again and held my arms tight. 'Harry,' she said fiercely, 'you won't ever talk like that again, will you?'

'About what?'

'About calling it quits,' she said impatiently. 'About saying good-bye. About anything like that.'

'You know I didn't mean it, Kate. But I was frightened, too. It was just a way of grabbing you and shaking you by the shoulders.'

'Then next time, grab and shake. But no more talk like that. You swear?'

'I swear,' I said, and was about to kiss her when a piping little voice broke in from the doorway.

'Miss Ballou!' it said, as we both whirled to face it, and I know my face must have been as red as Kate's just then. 'Miss Ballou, I have something to say to you!'

She was a tiny old lady as grey and fragile as a pinch of ashes, but she stood there like a figure of avenging justice.

Kate caught her breath. 'Yes, Miss Frazee?'

'There is an atrocious odour of paint coming from this room, Miss Ballou, and it is making my sister and me quite ill. Would you mind doing something about it?'

'I'm dreadfully sorry, Miss Frazee. I had forgotten the door was open. I'll close it now.'

'Do,' said the old lady sternly. 'And I should like to suggest that you keep it closed in the face of certain exhibitions which respectable tenants of the house might not choose to witness.'

She marched off across the hallway like a grenadier after that parting shot, and Kate closed the door and leaned against it helplessly.

'Isn't she wonderful, Harry? Right out of Henry James, line for line.'

I was still numb from the surprise. 'Talk about scared,' I said, and then pulled myself up short.

Kate looked at me, no longer smiling. 'I know, Harry,' she said evenly. 'I suppose we both had the same idea the instant she started talking. Lucille is here, and all hell is going to break loose. That's about it, isn't it?'

'Yes,' I said, 'that's about it.'

She played with the ring on her finger for a long while, and then spoke suddenly. 'Lucille Ayres,' she said. 'Mrs Democles.'

'I don't give a damn about that, Kate,' I said angrily. 'We're going to hold on to what we have, and nobody's going to take it from us. I'll work out something; sooner or later I'll think of something, but meanwhile let's make the best of it. That's all I ask, Kate.'

She traced a finger back and forth over the emerald in an infinite series of patterns. 'That's all we can do, Harry. But it's not going to be easy. Believe me, darling, it's not going to be easy at all.'

She was right, of course. No situation can ever remain static; it may move one way or another, but move it must under all the blind pressure put on it. We are all like dominoes, I think, set up on end next to each other so that

some huge, cynical finger can flick the first one over and send the whole row toppling. Call it God or Devil or Fate or Nature or whatever you will, that finger is always there to set us up only to knock us over again, and you can no more escape it than any domino can march out of the line to be off somewhere by itself.

It came inexorably as the spring turning into summer. The shadow of Lucille grew longer and longer over me, and while she never showed by the flicker of an eye what she thought of my comings and goings, there was no escaping the fact that she knew of them, that she must think *something* of them. And my meetings with Kate became marked with tensions and undercurrents that more and more often turned them into pure misery. If at any of these times Kate had abruptly said, 'For God's sake, Harry, now let's call it quits,' I wouldn't have been surprised. I would have been stubborn about it, or angry, I suppose, but not surprised. And if I had been the one to say it I think she would have had the same reactions.

But, as it turned out, Lucille also had something to say, and being Lucille she said it promptly.

CHAPTER 6

SHE spoke to me in the bedroom, and all the while we were talking there I was aware of some waltz music playing on Dick's phonograph in his room at the end of the hall. Not the kind of Strauss waltz I was familiar with, but something which sounded as if the composer had elaborated on it and tortured it out of shape. The music rose and fell, and when it was loud we raised our voices over it, and when it was soft we spoke under it, and there was a moment when I had the feeling that all our speaking didn't really mean

anything, couldn't mean anything, but was no more than a grotesque counterpoint to that music.

'I warned you about what her going with Matthew Chaves could lead to, Harry.'

'You mean she's going to marry him? She told you that?'

'As far as she's concerned it's just a matter of naming the time and place. And I'm supposed to be grateful that she even bothered to tell me about it.'

'Why not?' I said. 'What was there to stop her from eloping and sending us a card from Niagara Falls?'

'Maybe the fact that she'd be eloping with somebody who couldn't even afford to buy a ticket to Niagara Falls. Somebody who'd just as lief set himself up in your house, eat at your table, and let his wife work for him in case there's any little things his heart desires. Does that make any sense to you, Harry?'

'Does it matter what my opinion is in all this, Lucille? Especially', I remarked dryly, 'when you seem to know so much more about what Matt has and wants than I possibly could.'

She smirked. 'But not according to your daughter, Harry. Not a bit of it. If you should ask your daughter, you know Matthew Chaves *very* well, and you think he's a *very* fine young man. In case you didn't know that about yourself just ask Bettina sometime, and she'll tell you.'

'I don't have to ask her anything, Lucille. I do know Matt, and I don't think Bettina's making any mistake in marrying him. And if I thought she was there still isn't a thing in the world I could do about it.'

'Yes you could. You could do plenty.'

I silently cursed that way she had of seizing only on what you said that could be bent her way.

'Why would I want to do anything?' I demanded.

'Because you could save her a lot of misery, Harry. I don't want her making the same mistake I did.'

I could feel the taste that left, as if I had bitten into a rotten piece of fruit.

‘Maybe Matt won’t turn out to be as bad a bargain as I am,’ I said.

She flared up at that. ‘Being sarcastic doesn’t change anything, Harry! You and I both know what’s going on right now, and maybe if Bettina knew too it would change her mind about how good your high and mighty opinions are. It doesn’t take any brains to know that opinions are worth just as much as the one they’re coming from, does it, Harry?’

‘Lucille,’ I said slowly, ‘you hate Bettina’s thinking anything of my opinions, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘if they’re going to push her into making a mess of her life, I do.’

‘Enough to torment her by telling her about Kate and me.’

‘Enough to tell her that her father and her fine young man have a lot more in common than she ever dreamed – a fancy lady who moved right next door where she could be near enough to have them take turns warming her bed for her!’

The words racketed around the room, dinned obscenely in my ears, and all the while that interminable waltz poured down the hallway as if in tune with them.

‘In other words,’ I finally said, ‘you’ll try a little blackmail. Either I go to Bettina with my instructions, or you go to her with your story.’

‘I don’t expect you to go to Bettina, Harry.’

I looked at her, bewildered and furious. ‘Then what in God’s name is this all about!’

‘I want you to talk to *him*. I want you to tell him once and for all to go away. I don’t care how you do it as long as he doesn’t show his face around here any more. Once he’s gone she’ll forget about him soon enough.’

She said this with a terrible urgency, twisting her hands together and speaking as if she were stretched on a rack and the words were being dragged from her sentence by sentence. Her feelings were all on the surface then, and it was a weakness in me that I could understand them and be brought close to sharing them, because it gave her all the advantage. Lucille never knew that kind of weakness. In her one-dimensional world where everything was neatly labelled with the appropriate tags you only had to respond in the required manner to the tags; you didn't try to enter into someone else's feelings, or see the world through his eyes.

'Now look,' I said, 'Matt isn't any child. If I start playing the heavy father what makes you think he'd even listen to me?'

'He will. He has to.'

'But what if he doesn't?'

She was very pale. 'Then it would only be because you didn't really care, Harry. And if that's the way you want it I'll put it to you straight. I'm going to that Ballou woman and settle things between you two. If there's no other way to bring you to your right mind and make you see how you have to act as a father I'll do it that way. You're not entitled to have your cake and eat it, too; no one in the world is entitled to that. If you don't care to show consideration to your daughter you'll show it to me, and that's all there is to it.'

The sheer hypocrisy of this was breath-taking. 'To drag Kate Ballou into this . . . !' I started to say, but she cut me off shrilly.

'Don't you go playing the righteous one, Harry Ayres!' she cried. 'Don't you carry on as if *I* was wronging *you*! I'm the one that has the right to talk. How do you think it feels every time I look outside and see that house next door? Or see her walking down the street bold as brass laughing

at me inside? Do you think there's any pleasure in my life with that filth under my nose?'

Check and mate. That was all I could think of then, that I had been the one who was going to play the moves like a chess game, and it had been a losing game all the way. Conscience is too much of a handicap; it fills a man with fear and pity and self-contempt, and leaves him as exposed as a shellfish without its shell.

I looked at Lucille, and it suddenly struck me that the music Dick had been playing must have come to a stop while she was speaking. Everything had come nicely to a climax together. All that was left were moves of desperation, and the first had to be that talk with Matt, whether on Lucille's terms or my own or Matt's I still didn't know, but, I thought drearily, it would more than likely be on Lucille's.

On Saturday evenings he worked a late shift on the ferry, and the idea of sitting and waiting for him to show up – which he might not – was a grim one. The only thing to do, as I saw it, was to drive down to the ferry and meet him there. My car was alone in the garage looking a little more respectable than it could against the Cadillac's magnificence, and I backed out so recklessly that I almost ran down Dick, who was coming across the driveway. He yelled, and I stamped down on the brake almost simultaneously, and then he moved back and leaned against the side door of the house looking like the image of death.

'Dick,' I said quickly, 'are you hurt?'

He shook his head.

'Are you sure?'

I could see his chest rising and falling as he tried to catch his breath. Then he nodded. 'I'm all right, father,' he said. 'Honest, I am.'

'For God's sake, boy, watch yourself,' I told him, and thought as I turned the car into the street, that was all that had to happen. Some accident to Dick would just round

out the picture, and all that would be left then was to run the car down to the river and into it and settle my troubles once and for all.

It didn't help to think of those troubles, one by one, either, as I drove along. The best thing to do, I decided, was simply to improvise as I had to. It was impossible to think of anything logical to tell Matt, anything that came to my mind seemed more likely to make him laugh than sympathize, and I was hardly in the mood for laughter then.

But all my forebodings proved pointless, because when I got down to the ferry slip the ferry was there, but Matt was not. There was another deck hand on duty, a tall, thin boy with an Adam's apple.

'Matt?' he said. 'He took off about ten minutes ago when the boat came in, so I'm holdin' down the rest of his trick. We fixed it so next Saturday night when I'm supposed to go on he takes over for me all night. Nothin' wrong with that, is there?'

'No,' I said, 'I only wanted to know where I could find him.'

The boy smirked. 'Dunno,' he said, 'but if you catch up with the best lookin' redhead and the classiest car you ever laid eyes on you'll probably find him right along.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, this redhead comes over on the last trip, and all the way over she's arguin' with him, she'll give him a lift back to town, she's got somethin' important to talk to him about, and so on. And after he fixed up the deal with me, off they go.' The boy shook his head. 'That Matt. I don't even know where to look to get myself somethin' that don't have two heads, and all he got to do is whistle, and the best-lookin' women you ever did see throw theirselves all over him. There's a little school teacher comes down here sometimes. . . .'

'Thanks,' I said, and left him standing there with a

quarter in his hand, and a surprised look on his face. I went back to the car, and sat for a long while in the darkness, watching the river and the ferry moving out across it, and the wake of foam behind the boat like a ferment of soapsuds. It made a long white scar on the water and looking at it was pleasantly hypnotic. Then I shook myself from the spell and started the car. Matt was with Kate or with Bettina, and I certainly had no intention of telling him what I had to before either of them.

On an impulse, instead of turning the car into Jackson Avenue, which was the shortest way to Nicholas Street, I continued along Ferry Street, which wound through the old section of town to Five Corners. I pulled up in front of Jay's Bar and Grille there, and went in. I don't know why I did this, I could have gone into any of the first-class bars in the Plaza if I had really wanted a drink, or, for that matter, could have gone to my own pantry at home.

I think I was driven by a sort of wistful casting back, a search for an earlier and pleasanter time when my small world was built secure as a castle, and there was no confusion or hating. Five Corners then was a prim and proper neighbourhood, and Jay's Saloon was a prim and proper stronghold in the middle of it. It was cool and dark and very clean and an admirable background for Jay himself, a dignified little gentleman who always looked as if he had been freshly starched.

My father spent a good deal of his time there, but on Saturday afternoons during the warm weather I was allowed to go along, too, and I would sit alone at a small table in the corner in a mood of prolonged ecstasy nursing a cold bottle of pop while he stood at the bar discussing affairs of note with a half-dozen of the town's leading lights. Outside, the sunlight would flicker dazzlingly along the hood of our touring car parked at the door, but inside there was a cool aura of well-being that lay as thick as smoke in the room.

I was fourteen years old the day that Prohibition came into being, and I went along with my father to Jay's that day. Later, I heard stories about the carousals that went on in some of the other saloons in town the same afternoon, but Jay's remained unchanged up to the last minute. The conversation was quiet and sober, each drink was properly paid for, and the only difference was that as we left Jay came around the bar to shake hands with each of us.

'Good luck,' said my father, and I remember clearly how Jay looked at him smiling a little and said, 'I think we'll need it, Mr Ayres. Between this and the war it's the end of the old days and the old ways.'

Now I was going in again for the first time since that day, only I was Mr Ayres now, and Jay was young Jay who wasn't even born the day his grandfather had locked up the old saloon for the last time. He was working behind the bar at a furious rate, but he looked at me, and after a second or two, recognized me.

'Beer,' I said, and after he had served me he went back to his work without another glance. And standing there looking at my beer I knew what I must have known in my heart all along. There was no going back, there never was. Instead of cool quiet, there was hot, murky, furious noise. A racketing juke box over yelling voices. Instead of well-being, there was panic. In all my life I never felt so alone as I did then.

I drove back to the house wearily, and when I turned into Nicholas Street the silence and darkness reminded me for the first time of the late hour. Swinging into the driveway I cut the motor and let the car coast noiselessly into the garage. Then I locked the doors behind it and Kate's car as quietly as I could and started down the alley toward the side door of the house. All I could think of now was what to tell Lucille, how to forestall her from doing something foolish and damaging, and then I was suddenly caught up

short by the glare of the kitchen light coming through the window.

Matt was standing in the centre of the kitchen facing Bettina. I could hear his voice, but he spoke so softly I could not make out the words. She turned away from him, and he caught her arm and swung her back so that she was held tight against his body. And then while I stood transfixed, not meaning to interlope, he drew her lips to his and kissed her with such hungry passion and tenderness combined that her body seemed to melt helplessly against his, and you could see the current between them come alive before your eyes.

No man has the right to see his daughter at a moment like that, and I suppose the good and proper man if he did would feel an outrage, an anger, a jealousy, I don't know what. I only know that to my own surprise my feelings were an honest gladness for her and for what she had found, and a courage in myself that had been lost for a long time.

I opened the door and let it slam loudly behind me. Then I waited in the darkness of the landing until I heard Bettina's footsteps hastily moving across the floor to the inner door, and I let her open it. She looked flustered for a moment, and then smiled at me.

'This is a fine hour to come traipsing in,' she said.

'I was out driving,' I said apologetically.

'Oh, mother said it was some kind of business deal. She went to bed long ago.'

I had an anxious thought. 'Before Matt came?'

Bettina glanced at Matt, and then looked at me defiantly. 'Yes,' she said. 'Why?'

'No chaperon,' Matt remarked. 'And right on Nicholas Street in the wee hours.'

'God forbid,' I said. 'As a matter of fact, from what I heard it isn't chaperons you people are going to have to worry about in a little while; it's baby-sitters.'

It wasn't in the best of taste, but I was desperately anxious to show them that I was on their side right then, and it was the only opening that came to mind. It left a blank little silence, and then Bettina said to me uncertainly, 'I suppose mother told you. I mean about Matt and me.'

'She did,' I said, 'and all I need to know now is the time and the place so that we can wake up Nicholas Street with the fanciest wedding it's ever seen.'

Bettina began to glow as if a light had been turned on in her. 'I'm so glad,' she said. 'I mean, Matt's been talking about elopement so long, because of mother – because there might be some fuss – but this way it's so much better. . . .'

Matt looked at me levelly. 'Elopement's a great institution, Harry,' he said. 'You wouldn't really have any objection to it if I used a good, strong ladder, would you?'

We understood each other very well, he and I. 'Maybe we'd better leave the details for another time,' I said. 'Meanwhile, considering the hour, I'll be getting to bed.'

'No coffee and cake?' Bettina protested.

'That'll also be left for another time.' I kissed her and shook Matt's hand, and left them there with the door swinging shut behind them while I slowly made my way up the stairs and through the dark hall to the bedroom. Even running up a flight of steps had never affected me before, yet as I stood there in the blackness removing my shirt I could feel my heart thudding away like a trip hammer inside me. I had made up my mind as to what I would say to Lucille, and I wanted her to wake up to hear it, but at the same time I was deathly afraid of her hearing it and glad that she was asleep so that the issue could still be kept at a distance.

Then she turned in bed, I could hear it creak under her, and sat up so that her nightgown glimmered white in the room.

'Harry?' she said.

'Yes.'

‘What time is it?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. We were speaking in the unnecessarily hushed voices that one uses in a dark room.

‘It must be late.’ She yawned loudly. ‘I’ve been in and out of bed a half dozen times waiting for you. I must have fallen asleep.’

My hand was frozen on the last button of my shirt. ‘I’m sorry I woke you up.’

‘That’s all right. Did you speak to him?’

I hesitated. ‘About getting out and not seeing Bettina again – no.’

Her voice started to tighten. ‘Did you speak to him at all?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I spoke to him.’

‘Well, what did you tell him?’

‘I told him that I’d give him the biggest wedding this town has ever seen, and, if you must know, I told it to Bettina, too.’

The light on the headboard of the bed suddenly flashed on, and Lucille glared at me with her eyes squinting against it.

‘Are you crazy?’ she demanded.

‘No, I told them exactly what I wanted to.’

Even though her eyes were getting accustomed to the light they remained narrowed. ‘But you understood what I wanted. I gave you fair warning, Harry.’

‘Lucille,’ I said, and drew a deep breath, ‘you can do your damndest. If my daughter can be talked out of this marriage because of any sins I’ve committed she doesn’t deserve Matt Chaves. And as far as Kate Ballou is concerned, it’s all over between us. So whatever tricks you want to play, go right to it. I won’t wish you good luck, but you’ve got all my sympathy, Lucille.’

She looked at me dumbfounded so that both of us were posed in a fantastic tableau for what seemed a thousand

years, and then she abruptly turned her back on me and lay like that in unyielding silence. After I had pulled my shirt off I switched the light out and finished undressing in the dark. I lay in bed as far from her as I could, and tried to sleep, but could not. In a little while her breathing became even and hoarse, but I still remained in the same position. I ached from head to foot when a grey dawn showed through the window, and then when it was light enough I quickly dressed, found my painting materials, and went out in the back yard to work some of my tension out.

I wanted to do an abstract treatment of the garage under the early light, but the wall of Kate's house kept interposing. I would lay down a few strokes and find my eyes fixed on that wall, and my mind dwelling on how thin that wall was, and how incapable of keeping us apart, while Lucille had raised a barrier that needed no cement or stone to do its work perfectly. And Lucille was still capable of doing far more than that. That was a thought that kept rising over the horizon of my mind like a thundercloud.

CHAPTER 7

IT is curious how much a bare flicker of facial expression, a minute physical gesture, can tell to someone whose senses have been sharpened to a needle point of receptivity. When we sat down at the breakfast table Bettina gave me a single, quick, hurt glance, and then sat with her eyes downcast so that I knew at once that Lucille had made good her threat. Matt caught my eye and then pursed his lips, looking at the ceiling and shaking his head slowly, and I realized that Bettina must have immediately taken him into her confidence. And once when his hand happened to touch hers she pulled away with a sudden little fury which made it obvious

on the spot that whatever she had told him he certainly had not been properly sympathetic.

Even Dick, ordinarily so grave and pleasant, seemed to be caught in the undercurrent of feeling that circled the table. It was not only the rank bad manners of his snatching the Sunday paper from the sideboard and combing through it while at the table, but he acted with such sullen antagonism to everyone that it was almost a relief when he left the table without eating more than a mouthful and slammed his way out of the room.

It was a relief that did not last long. With Dick gone, and with Junie sent off to the kitchen, and the decks, so to speak, cleared for action, Lucille turned to Matt.

‘I think you know exactly what I’m going to say,’ she told him, and to my surprise her voice was shaking. ‘I left it to my husband to make it plain that this affair between you and Bettina had gone far enough, but it looks as if he didn’t have nerve enough to speak up to you. Now I understand that Bettina told you this morning just how she felt, and that it was all over, once and for all.’

Matt nodded pleasantly at this, thrust his hands into his pockets and leaned back in his chair, something which served only to key up Lucille still further. For the first time I could remember, she was addressing someone else besides myself in the shrill voice hitherto reserved only for her private discussions with me.

‘I think it’s despicable, Mr Chaves, to take advantage of people’s good nature and hospitality the way you are doing right now. And if it takes plain talk to make you understand that you aren’t free to come and go here as if you paid rent, that you aren’t at liberty to go tracking your dirty shoes . . .’

Matt coolly looked down at his shoes – brand-new sneakers they looked like to me – and then at Lucille. ‘They’re Dick’s shoes,’ he remarked.

Lucille’s mouth opened in outrage, and then she struck

the table with her clenched fist. 'I will not be laughed at!' she cried.

'Oh,' said Matt, 'I'm far from laughing. Behold a man torn from his love, ordered from the warm refuge he had found – Betty, do you think that's a reason for laughter?'

Bettina looked at him, her eyes wide and frightened. 'I think you're rotten,' she said at last in a quiet, level voice.

He leaned forward toward her. 'But do you want me to leave?'

Her lips parted, she tried to say something, and failed. Then suddenly she clapped both hands to her face, and sat there, her body racked by long, shuddering sobs. Matt was on his feet in an instant, but Lucille was just as fast, and stood there facing him and blocking Bettina from him, the mother hen guarding her chick. They glared at each other, and Matt's face was pure, undistilled hate.

'You're doing this to her,' he said hoarsely.

'It's time she came to her senses,' Lucille threw back.

'She's got no right to cry! She's only got the right to find pleasure in every breathing moment of her life! And because you never had that for yourself you're trying to take it away from her, too!'

'Fine words,' Lucille said coldly.

'True words,' he said, 'and by God, she knows it. Only, she's backsliding, and she knows that, too, and that's what's hurting her.'

'It doesn't suit you to talk like a preacher, Mr Chaves,' Lucille snapped. 'You'd be smart to leave that to your elders and betters.'

He looked at her with surprise, and, I think, a little admiration. 'No,' he said at last, 'I suppose it doesn't suit me very well. So let's dispense with it, let's get down to cold cases. Maybe that's more my style.' He turned to me. 'Harry,' he said, 'everybody here knows the score, and

there's no reason to pretend otherwise. I mean, about you and Kate.'

'Matt,' I protested, 'there's no reason to drag that in.'

'I think there is, Harry, because that's what set all this off right now. You see, I had a long talk with Kate last night. I was supposed to tell you about it sometime when we were alone today, but I think that doing it right out in the open might clear up some of the reek of hypocrisy in this room.'

He was trying to strike back at Lucille, I knew, and yet he was only hurting me. And there was no way of stopping him.

'Kate's giving up the house next door, Harry. She can't stand living here the way things are, and tonight she's packing up some personal stuff and moving back to the city for good. When she gets an apartment I'm supposed to take care of getting all the furniture and stuff shipped there.'

'That's smart,' I forced myself to say. 'I think that's a wise move.'

'And about time!' Lucille said triumphantly.

'Is it?' Matt said. 'Well, there's one other thing I'm supposed to tell you, Harry. She wants you to come along with her. Tonight if you possibly can, and if not, as soon as you can clear things up and settle down in New York. She says it's got to be one way or the other, Harry, and she's willing to take her chances this way. And while she didn't say it I can tell you what the reason is. She loves you, and nothing else matters a damn.'

He was addressing this as much to Bettina as to me, and when she put her hands down to look at me uncertainly and fearfully I felt myself going weak with hopelessness.

'I'm sorry, Matt,' I said. 'It wouldn't work out.'

It was a slap in the face to him.

'You're a fool, Harry!' His voice was incredulous. 'You'll get a divorce - make a good life for yourself . . . !'

‘No,’ I said, ‘I’m not going to do it, Matt. Please forget it. Forget the whole thing.’

He came around the table swiftly and his hand dug into my shoulder hard enough to make me wince. ‘I don’t believe you, Harry. My God, you still love her, don’t you!’

The words were like a knife thrust. ‘Matt!’ I shouted, and then pulled away from him and almost blindly ran out of the room.

I ran like that right out to the open porch, and while I stood there trying to right my thoughts some people passed by – I didn’t even recognize them – and it struck me then how I must look, what they must be thinking. So I went back to the empty living-room, and sat in my armchair there. The newspaper was in the chair, but I had no heart to look at it, to do anything, for that matter, but sit there with my eyes closed, half-dozing, but never quite enough to numb the pain in me.

That is how Lucille found me when she came to tell me that Kate Ballou was dead.

CHAPTER 8

IT has been my misfortune that while I have seen death only twice in my lifetime, in each case it has been death by violence. Not the peaceful parting words, the closing of the eyes in the last sleep, but the abrupt and violent wrenching of life from its shell. What is left after that is impossible to recognize or understand. It is what you loved, and yet it is not. It is there, and it isn’t. Nothing is very real then, but you turn your face from reality, because you know it can only intensify your hurt.

All I could think at first was that she must be terribly uncomfortable lying there like that on those steps, and even

after Matt went upstairs and returned with a sheet that he threw over her I couldn't shake that thought. Then he helped me upstairs to the kitchen, and we sat there mutely until Morten and Dr Greenspan arrived. It was only after that that an edge of clarity started to cut through the grey gelatinous limbo I was sunk in.

Somehow, I had imagined that they would lay her out decently, and carry her away at once so that she need not be uncomfortable any more. Instead, Dr Greenspan remained in the cellar, while Morten came up looking grave and concerned, and started a sort of aimless worrying through the house. I could hear his footsteps sounding through the rooms, and up the stairs, and over my head, until each step became a hammer blow on my skull. Finally, he came down to the kitchen again, and the doctor joined him there shaking his head. They spoke together quietly in a corner for a long while, and then Morten turned to Matt and me.

'Somebody ought to be notified,' he said. 'Do you know of any relatives, any people maybe, I should get in touch with?'

'I don't know of any relatives,' Matt said.

'Any other people? Somebody close to her?'

'No,' Matt said, 'I'm the only one close to her.'

The meaning of that stabbed me.

'Wait a second, Morten,' I started to say, but Matt cut me off angrily.

'Keep out of this, Harry!' he said. 'You don't have anything to do with it.'

He was only trying to help me, I understood, but in his own interests it was the worst thing he could have said just then. A subtle change came over Morten's whole manner. He rocked slowly back and forth on his feet, studying Matt up and down, and pursing his lips all the while. Then he said very softly, 'I suppose you're Mr Ayres' lawyer, aren't you?'

'No,' Matt said, 'I'm his friend.'

Morten made a gesture toward the cellar. 'And that young lady, you were her friend, too.'

'Yes, I was.'

'In fact', Morten remarked, 'just about everybody's friend.'

Matt stood up facing him. 'You're getting at something,' he said slowly, 'but I don't know what. Now why don't you just speak up and get it over with.'

'Oh, I will,' Morten said, 'I will. But if you don't mind, I would like to do it next door, so that I can talk to everybody all together. Is that all right with you, Harry?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Anything. But, for God's sake, Morten, you're not going to leave her lying there, are you!'

'No, no,' he said soothingly. 'I guess Dr Greenspan can take care of that now. Meanwhile we'll go over and see if we can't get everybody all together.'

I watched the ambulance pull away, and its going seemed to pull the props of my endurance from under me. The lack of sleep, the tension, the surcharge of emotion in me rose up around me like an anaesthetic. I sat in the living-room of my home and looked at everyone, and they were all strangers, and everything they said or did was remote. Kate had died – no, now I understood that she had been killed – and Bob Macek did it. Why, I thought with a little surprise, he must have been crazy. And Lucille smiled and smiled on her day of triumph, but wasn't every day a day of triumph for her?

That was all it meant to me, really, nothing at all, because it was obscured by the picture of an ambulance rolling away into the bright sunlight of the street, and the empty house it left behind, and the empty studio in Washington Square. And Harry, where there was once Harry and Kate.

We had met on a day like this, a fine Sunday morning with the breath of early summer in the air, we had our year together, and she died. And what was left to me was a long walk over one of those monstrous plains by Dali where

parallel lines meet at infinity. At times I might forget, I might reach out my hand to her and say, 'Kate - ' but there would be no one to answer, and what I had meant to say would remain unsaid.

She had been the only one who ever thought that something I might say would be worth listening to.

PART FOUR · *Bettina*

CHAPTER 1

BACK straight, legs together, feet flat on the floor, and hands neatly clasped on the lap.

Outside in the blazing sunlight that beat down on the porch my mother stood cool and serene and told her neighbours that Kate Ballou had been murdered. Inside, where the light could not force its way through the green blinds at the windows, the room was a cave deep under water. My father and Matt were unreal images in the water, and behind them on the mantelpiece the clock ticked away the minutes and with each tick told me that Kate Ballou was dead, dead, dead.

And all I could do was sit there, back straight, legs together, feet flat on the floor, and hands clasped neatly on the lap.

Miss Prim.

My father had called me that the first time he ever saw me sitting this way, but I hadn't cared. I was twelve then, and on my way Up the Steps to Beauty if the article I had found in mother's magazine was to be trusted. And there was a picture on the first page of the article. A beautiful débutante was seated in the prescribed manner, and over her hovered a man. *The man.* My man, in fact.

He was tall and slender, and on his patrician features he wore an expression of hopeful adoration that made my stomach tighten despairingly every time I closed my eyes and thought of him. Behind the locked door of my room one night I coloured him with my wax crayons. His hair became blond, his face and hands took on a manly tan, and his eyes were chips of flashing blue. That was how I made him, and that was how he came to me when I called.

At first there had to be dramatic prefaces to his appearance. I was a spy captured by Nazis, and he was the

Intelligence man who appeared in trench coat to rescue me. I recklessly tried to swim across the Hudson from below the ferry slip, but I weakened in mid stream and was lost until he appeared in trim cabin cruiser and swimming trunks. And then I began to realize that the scenes after his appearance could be made so interesting that the prefaces were really a waste of time.

Jonathan was his name, and he was with me all through the agony of my futile climb Up the Steps to Beauty. Mother would drag the comb through my hair a dozen times and then say, 'I don't know how we're ever going to get it to look like anything, Bettina,' or would kneel before me pinning up a new dress and say through the pins in her mouth, 'If you only had *some* kind of figure, Bettina,' until it became clear enough that for this Ugly Duckling there was small chance of a happy ending. It hurt, but there was still Jonathan, and so the dreams took on a new form. I was still Bettina Pickett Ayres, nice, plain Bettina Pickett Ayres, the epitome of everything I loathed in a female, and Jonathan, even my Jonathan, couldn't recognize his true love in this wretched form. But then the magic key was delivered into my hand – some secret lotion, some strange preparation, the hairdresser with the magician's hands, the Cinderella gown – and forthwith a new Bettina was born, and Jonathan was hers on the spot.

I loved him, God, how I loved him, and so, of course when it came time for the real Bettina to lose her heart to some man it had to be Matt Chaves, who was short, and square, and dark, and violent, and nothing at all that the dream was, and everything that it wasn't. But Kate Ballou could have been part of the dream, because she had been all I ever wanted to be when I lay awake at night and cried a little.

I hated her for that, and I hated her even more later on when I knew I was in love with Matt, and knew that every time he saw her I was that much plainer and less attractive

to him. When I once got up my courage to tell him that he was furious.

‘I tell you that I love you,’ he said. ‘I want to marry you. Doesn’t that mean anything?’

It meant everything and nothing. If I only understood, really understood deep down in me, why he loved me, what he saw in marriage to me, it would solve so many things.

‘Like a schoolmarm,’ he said. ‘Two and two must equal four. They can never equal x , and let x go hang.’

Like a schoolmarm. All those nymphs in novels clawing at satyrs in well-cut afternoon suits and whimpering, ‘Take me!’ but when I went up to Matt’s room over the ferry house to wait for him while he showered, and he made an entrance, wet-haired and glowing and mother naked, all I could do was gape at him.

He stood there and grinned maliciously. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘just as you supposed all along, I’m male.’

‘I didn’t need any reassurance on that,’ I managed to say.

‘Truth to tell,’ he remarked pleasantly, ‘this is just a labour-saving device. If you’re as much in the mood for a seduction as I am it would be pretty foolish for me to get dressed, wouldn’t it?’

There were people’s voices in the street below us, and a smell of tar and oil and river water in the air, and the room was as dismal as a prison cell. I had never imagined it would come about like this, but I was in the mood, all right. Only scared. Scared witless. It was shivering excitement that put enough strength into my fingers for me to find buttons and hooks. A dress. Brassière. Sandals. Panties. And then I should have whimpered, ‘Take me!’ like all the heroines in the books, but I couldn’t.

‘God, you’re lovely,’ Matt said, and took a step toward me, and this time it was the fright that went to work. Panties. Sandals. Brassière – damn those hooks and eyes – and dress. And my hair a mess now, everything a mess, and

Matt laughing helplessly and saying, 'It's all right, darling. You're as pure as you ever were. Take my word for it.'

'Matt, don't hate me. I don't know what it is, but I can't, not right now. If you only won't hate me.'

'Darling, I loved you, I am loving you, I will love you – does that register? God, how could I help it after this. If you could have only seen yourself . . .'

Like a schoolmarm. Bettina Pickett Ayres. Miss Prim, the schoolmarm.

Then why did he think he loved me? A long time ago, a hundred years ago, the day he told me he had left New York and was taking that ridiculous job on the ferry, I asked him that for the first time.

'Because you're part of my dream.'

'What dream?'

'The big one. The one everybody has where he sees himself as he'd like to be. The one that usually makes all the trouble.'

'Why trouble?'

'Why? Because if you pick the wrong one, honey, the curse is on you. And of this time and place, meaning right now in the good old U.S.A., somebody is always putting it up to you to pick the wrong one. Be a Success in Business – Be a Hollywood Star – Write a Best Seller – Marry a Millionaire – they've got you cornered, honey. Take a look around you right now. My dollar to any doughnut you want to bet that while we sit here and discourse, Junie sees herself as the star in a super MGM production; her guy, Macek, sees himself out on the mound in the Yankee Stadium pitching a World Series game; your kid brother sees himself waving a baton in front of the New York Philharmonic, and so it goes.'

'Is that wrong?'

'Don't you think that even a donkey with a carrot tied in front of his nose to lead him along is going to be a

damned unhappy donkey sooner or later when it strikes him that he isn't getting any nearer the carrot?'

'I should think he'd be happy just dreaming about the moment he gets to the carrot, even though he never does.'

'Then he'd be wrong. Because all the while he's plodding along nursing that carrot pipe-dream he's passing right by all the good things in the world. Look at that girl donkey over there. She's got ears a foot long and a million-dollar figure, and she's smart, too, but he moves right along. Look at that meadow over there. The tastiest grass in the world and beautiful flowers to look at while you eat it. Feel that breeze from over the river. Pine trees and cold running water mixed half and half, and all yours. But not for our donkey. Hell, he couldn't even tell you where he was if you asked him. All he sees is that carrot six inches from his nose, and if that's happiness he can have it.'

I thought of Jonathan, and even though I had never told Matt about him I felt angry and humiliated.

'And what makes your dream so superior?' I said.

'The fact that I can take it in my hands and make it real. My dream is just you and me, Betty, and to hell with success and all the trimmings. I don't care about tomorrow, Betty, there are enough minutes today – any single day – to make it exciting. If I wake up tomorrow and find that I've got a whole new day to work on I'm that much ahead of the game. But if I don't, well, I've had today, and that's what's important.'

'The world's champion hedonist.'

'Anyhow, a leading contender.'

'But what happens when you wake up tomorrow – I mean, *if* you wake up tomorrow, although you make it sound so unlikely – and find a man waiting for the rent?'

'Look, lady, you're talking to a character who could write a book about men waiting for the rent. Nine kids in three rooms, and your father is just a dumb Portuguese long-shoreman who was out of work half the time because he

didn't believe in paying kickbacks to the racketeers who ran the docks. You live like that, and you find the landlord living right there on the doorstep along with you.

'I think that was the thing which started me off on my first dream, the cockeyed one. I was going to have money, enough money to buy that house right from under the landlord if I wanted to. I was going to have clothes like the landlord and a car like his. Whatever he ate, I was going to eat, too, and wherever he went for his good times, I was going there. That was the dream, all right; I was going to be one great big success like the landlord, who, now when I look back, turns out to be a shrivelled-up little roach who looked as if it would crack his face if he ever tried to laugh.

'And I damn near made it, too. I was Ned, the reasonably honest newspaper boy, and with pluck and luck wound up right in Mr Wallace Morrison's pine-panelled offices. First mate to a tycoon. What more could my little heart have wanted if there was anything in this pipe-dream business?'

'A good steady job on a broken-down ferryboat at charity wages, no doubt.'

'As revelation had it, that is just what I wanted.'

'Oh, now we're out of dreams into revelations.'

'Not revelations. Just Revelation, like the last book of the Bible. You know, thunder, wild cymbals, and then—the light.'

'And a voice from out of the wilderness. We mustn't forget that voice.'

'No, it was a voice from out of the traffic on the north-east corner of Fifty-sixth Street and Fifth Avenue, and the first I heard of it it sounded just like the squeal of brakes. The next thing I knew, there I was flat on my back in the gutter, and everybody in New York City standing over me and making appropriate remarks.'

'Oh, Matt!' I cried, and in that wild instant I had the full whirl of thoughts which had him lying there broken, bleeding, dead, being carried away by an ambulance, the

doctor's mournful shake of the head as I stood there pleading with him, and then myself arguing with my mother that I had every right to attend the funeral, it was my place to be there! 'Oh, Matt, you were hit by a car!'

'But, for God's sake, Betty, I'm here to tell you about it. You don't have to look like that.'

'You might have been killed!'

'That is not an original thought. You are the twentieth person that has had it about my adventure, and, as a matter of fact, I was the first.'

'I'm glad you thought enough of me to let me become number twenty. If you hadn't started on this crazy thing about revelations ...'

'But it *isn't* crazy, that's what I'm trying to tell you. I sat there in the gutter, and my rear end hurt, my dignity hurt, and there was a rip in the knee of my pants. And what do you think was the first thing that came to my mind?'

'I haven't any idea. I don't even give a damn as long as you're not hurt.'

'The first thing that came to my mind was that I had a rip in the knee of my pants, and that if I walked into Wallace's office like that he'd be annoyed to death. Not worried, mind you, or amused, or even angry. Just annoyed. Petulance is his forte.'

'But you could go home and change again and then go to the office.'

'That was my second thought. I thought, "My God, now I'll have to go home and change and come back to the office late, and he'll be annoyed at that." You see, there wasn't any getting around it, no matter what happened Wallace was going to be annoyed. Even if I were killed he'd be annoyed because we're right in the middle of a circulation drive.'

'And then sitting there like that - remember, I was sitting in the gutter at the north-east corner of Fifty-sixth

Street and Fifth Avenue – I saw the sun shining on all those wonderful buildings, and all those beautiful women with their lovely legs and fine clothes standing there, and heard people talking to one another, and felt the breeze on my face, and I thought to myself, really a little surprised at how obvious it was, “Matt Chaves, for one second you were in a place where it is all darkness, and where you would never see Betty again or be close to her, and where you couldn’t ever see, smell, taste, touch, or hear any of the wonderful things back on this side of the Styx. But you have been given another chance, Matt Chaves, so go forth and make the most of it.”

‘You gave up your job because of *that*?’

‘After the formalities were over, and a young lady interne with extremely large breasts which I rejoiced to look at in my new-found wisdom had pronounced me fit, I walked directly to Central Park. I saw strange beasts, and I ate a Popsicle. And no matter how I tested my revelation I found it good. The old dream was gone, and Wallace Morrison couldn’t possibly have a place in the new one.’

‘But why? Matt, you knew that if anything could make things easier for us, could smooth the way for us with my mother and father, it was that you had a good job, and could make a nice home. Especially mother . . .’

‘Especially mother. Betty, didn’t it ever strike you that the dream your mother has for you is the same one she must have had for herself, and that it might prove to be as false for you as it was for her?’

‘All she wants is for me to be happy, Matt; I believe that with all my heart. And you can’t be happy when the man you marry has no stability, no . . .’

‘But that’s the point, Betty. Don’t you see, your mother’s idea of stability is that you can find it in a bank account, a fine home, social position, and that’s all wrong. That’s what she married for, I’m sure it was, and what happened to it

all when your father lost his money? You can't control material things, there's always something bigger than you ready to kick it out of your hands, and you've always got to sweat with fear about it, too.

'But if what you share with someone is love, why, it's all yours to give and take as long as you want to. Isn't that more solid than even the finest house on Nicholas Street?'

'Oh, Matt, mother wouldn't understand that. Nobody on Nicholas Street would ever understand that kind of talk.'

'Of course not, because they don't understand what love is! They're afraid of it. It's something that costs money, or security, or comfort. It might hurt you. It's the bad stuff that might wake up that donkey from his dream of that carrot. Beware.'

'I live on Nicholas Street, Matt.'

'But you're different.'

'Different from any other girl you ever knew?'

'There weren't very many, Betty. I suppose I ought to lie like some of those fake Don Juans about all the women in my life, but there were only a couple I knew well, and a couple of others I almost knew well, and that's about all. And they were all the same in one way. I would meet one, and I would fall in love with her. I mean honest-to-God in love so that it hurt. And she might like me, too, enough so that I could come close to her, but when I would talk to her about how I felt, or even if I showed it in my face, she would start backing away. There's a certain tricky way girls act at a time like that. They'll drink with you, talk to you about a million different idiot things, even go to bed with you. But they're afraid of love, afraid of that feeling in you that tells them this is the real thing. And then they start backing away.'

'After that a man starts changing. He buries that big feeling away in him so that it starts to shrivel up and dry, and the next thing you know he's as frightened and cynical

as any of those girls. When he sees a girl who stirs some feeling in him he sees her only as something to go to bed with. Nothing beyond that.

‘But when I came to know you, when I came to see that we were sharing our feelings without being afraid or ashamed, I knew that everything was all right again. I had gone off the track for a little while, but now I was back again, and everything was wonderful. I love you, Betty.’

He loved Betty, and Bettina Pickett Ayres lay awake in bed at night and cried because she didn’t really understand why he did.

And he could hate, too, with a high, furious feeling that was terrifying. Last night, while I waited for him on the porch, I saw him drive in seated next to Kate Ballou in her car. I saw them in the reflected glare of the headlights against the garage door as they talked there. Without hearing a word I could feel the rising heat in him. I waited, shaking inwardly, for him actually to hit her. Then as he went to the side door of the house I ran through to the kitchen to open the door and meet him there.

‘What were you and Kate Ballou talking about, Matt?’

‘Nothing!’

The heat was still there, and I shrank back from it. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry. . . .’

‘Jesus, don’t start cringing and being apologetic now!’

That pricked me like a needle. ‘You’re making it hard for me to do anything else,’ I said angrily.

‘And don’t blame it on me. I’m not your mother telling you you forgot to wash behind your ears, or that you came home ten minutes late from a walk. I’m the guy who loves you, remember, and the only time I expect you to apologize for anything is when you do something to hurt me. And I’ll let you know about that quick enough.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘You and Kate must have had a very interesting talk just now to get you worked up like that.’

'We had an extremely dull talk.'

'About what?'

'About shoes and ships and sealing-wax.'

'And me.'

'And you.'

I began to understand.

'She doesn't like me, does she?'

He looked at me narrowly. 'Does that bother you?'

'Of course not,' I said jauntily. And then I said, 'Oh, what's the use of my lying about it, Matt. She knows you so well, and she feels I'm not good enough for you, and, of course, it hurts. It hurts bad, Matt.'

He said dryly, 'You're not bad at psychology, are you?'

'I'm just a born little psychologist. It's one of my hidden virtues.'

'Then let me tell you something, my born little psychologist. Kate Ballou may not like you, but unless you know the merry little mess she's gotten her life into you couldn't possibly know why.'

Kate Ballou's life a mess? It was easier to think of Matt's suddenly becoming prim and proper than that.

He said, 'You see, Kate Ballou's jealous of you.'

'Of me?' I said incredulously.

'She didn't believe it either, even after I told it to her tonight. But it's true.'

'But why?'

'Because you have something she hasn't got. A man who loves you enough to think you're the only important thing in the world. Someone who loves you so much that all he can think of is marrying you and then spending the next fifty years being glad of it.'

I could feel the fear rising in me like a cold bubble. 'It's you, Matt, isn't it? She's in love with you.'

'Me?' he said with such honest surprise that the bubble was gone before it could catch in my throat. 'No, it's not

me. It's someone else. But he isn't willing to give her what I want to give you, and that's what she hates you for. So if you feel anything about her, Betty, it would have to be pity. That's all it comes to, no more and no less.'

No more and no less. The clock over the mantelpiece said five minutes after two, and now they would have stripped the clothes from her and put them neatly in a bag and locked them in a drawer, and put her in another drawer and slid it into the mortuary box where even pity would be wasted in the ice cold and the darkness.

Five minutes after two, so it was only five hours and thirty-five minutes ago that my mother had told me who Kate Ballou's man was, and I had died myself. It was not Bettina Pickett Ayres, nor even the dream Bettina that Matt talked to in my bedroom after breakfast, but something unfamiliar resurrected from their ashes, and Matt had seen that.

'You're not yourself when you talk like that, Betty. You're being your mother, seeing everything from her viewpoint, but it's not you.'

'No, maybe it's not the me you wanted, Matt, but it's me just the same. And it's wonderful. I'm getting out of this whole crazy world you set up for yourself where black is white, and everything is upside down, and you make up the rules as you go along. Nobody really belongs there, only you, and you'll have to stay there all by yourself now.'

'And you'll be right back on Nicholas Street where the only sin is being caught.'

'That's a fine defence of adultery.'

'I'm not defending adultery. I'm saying that your mother cheated your father out of what he expected in marriage. And when he finally found it with someone else she wouldn't permit him to have that either. She could have divorced him any time so that at least he could have made a clean start, but she wouldn't. If you live on Nicholas Street you're never

supposed to worry about another person's happiness. You only worry about what the neighbours think.'

'Or your children's happiness.'

'Oh, Betty, if you think your mother is concerned with your happiness and Dick's happiness that way, you're a fool. She just needs you like ivy needs the tree. Something to cling to, to feed on. The only difference is that the ivy doesn't lie to the tree that it's trying to make it happy!'

'It won't work, Matt. Since I've known you I've been torn apart. When I'm with you I find myself defending my mother; when I'm with her I have to defend you, and that's all over now. I know just where I stand, and you don't have any part of it.'

'And with that merry farewell I am supposed to walk out of your life.'

'Yes.'

'If I do it, Betty, shall I tell you what's bound to happen?'

'No.'

'I'll tell you, anyhow. Sooner or later you'll get married. And he'll be some dreary hulk from Nicholas Street who gets a paunch and jowls, and never reads anything except the sports pages, or listens to any music except the Hit Parade, and is as dull as dishwater in bed. And after a while you'll begin to see that you've been cheated, and I'll happen to come by some day, and then you'll find out at first hand why your father did what he did. But it will be too late.'

I slapped him then. I think when I did that I saw the scene, one where I was facing my dream Jonathan, and that somehow Matt would respond as Jonathan would: hurt, courtly, then brushing aside the sting with precise courtesy – but Matt was nothing that Jonathan was. He looked briefly surprised, and then his hand met my cheek so hard that the room whirled, and I found myself up against the wall, my eyes blind with tears, and the pain oozing from my face.

‘And now we’re even,’ said Matt, and walked out of the room on that, banging the door viciously behind him.

Now he sat with my father on the sofa, and the clock said twenty minutes after two, and we waited.

It was almost three when Mr Ten Eyck returned with Dick and Junie, and Bob Macek was with them.

CHAPTER 2

I REMEMBER wondering, when Junie started keeping company with Bob Macek, why she wasn’t frightened to death every time he put an arm around her. Unless you saw him playing football or baseball he looked slow and clumsy, but he was tremendously big and strong, and with a sort of violent need to prove his strength to you any chance he got. It was impossible to talk to him for more than two minutes without having him start on the subject of how hard he could throw a baseball, or how he could beat up some man, or how much meat he could carry in one armload, after which you would find yourself involved in the childish business of feeling his biceps and telling him how big it was.

All this might have been amusing in someone else, but there was a hard, sullen arrogance in Bob which made it thoroughly unfunny and a little frightening. I think the only time I ever saw a crack show in that arrogance was the evening he challenged Dick to some sort of arm-wrestling where, with elbows propped on the kitchen table and hands clasped, each tried to force the other’s arm down to the table. For all that he is so quiet and bookish Dick is very strong, and after minutes of straining and grunting with both their faces turning beet-red it was Bob’s arm that was forced down. They did it again, and again Dick won.

It was easy to see that Bob was sick with humiliation

and was looking for some way to redeem himself when he turned to Matt. 'How about you, Chaves? Want to try for the championship?'

'No thanks,' said Matt.

'Hell, for a little guy you look hard as nails. There must be some muscles there.'

'I retired them when I hit thirty. I figured that was the least I could do for them after they carried me this far.'

Bob was grinning all over, and you could see that crack in the arrogance mending while you watched. 'You don't say? You mean if somebody got hold of you like that,' he grabbed Matt's shoulders and shook him like a friendly bear, 'and roughed you up a little you'd just holler for the cops? Why, man, you're chicken.'

Matt abruptly knocked the arms aside and stood there looking at Bob, his face deadly. 'Look, my friend,' he said in a flat voice, 'I'll make myself clear. I don't like to be roughed up. I don't even like to be touched, and when anybody does it to me I take it he means business. If that's what you're aiming at we can take care of it right here in the kitchen where it's nice and light. We'll just push everything up to the wall and have all the room we want.

He looked like a taut watch spring against Bob, and Bob was growing bigger by the second. 'Hell, if that's what you want,' he said.

'That's what I want. But I also want to tell you one thing in advance. If we're going to fight it won't be for fun. The one thing I'll be trying to do is kill you, and any way I can do it is all right with me, including getting hold of a knife and shoving it into you. That's fair warning, so that when it's all over nobody'll have any kick coming.'

We all looked at him dumbfounded, and then Bob said what, I suppose, we were all thinking. 'You're kidding.'

'No, I'm dead serious.'

Bob glowered at him. 'Hell, I don't fight like that.'

‘That’s because you believe in fair play. It’s just your tough luck that I don’t.’

Bob shook his head blankly at that. ‘You know what?’ he finally said with absolute conviction. ‘You’re crazy.’

But they didn’t fight, and the only thing that came out of the queer little episode was that Junie’s antagonism to Matt became sharper than ever. She worshipped my mother, who did treat her very well, and from the start she had taken mother’s viewpoint of Matt. And that scene in the kitchen, and the way Bob had somehow been subtly discredited, added the finishing touch. There was never any questioning Junie’s fierce loyalty to Bob or her devotion to him, even though, at times, it made me think of a particularly frisky little French poodle taking charge of a large, sullen mastiff.

I had that thought now, watching them enter the room along with Mr Ten Eyck and Dick and my mother. Junie looked scared to death, but seemed to be herding Bob along.

Does a man want a woman to act like that at such a time? If I went over and sat down next to Matt, and held his hand, and looked around the room defiantly, what would he say and do? It was always hard to predict what he would say or do under any conditions, and it was harder than ever now. Suppose that he – suppose that Bob had really done to Kate what everyone thinks he has done – how would it feel to hold his hand? There wasn’t any question in Junie’s mind about that; why should there be such a tormenting doubt in mine?

‘I’m glad you all stayed here,’ Mr Ten Eyck said, ‘because it’s important to clear up as much of this as we can right now.’

And suppose he did clear it up? Suppose that suddenly Bob broke down and admitted in front of us all that he had killed Kate Ballou? What would Junie do then? Again

there wasn't any doubt about the answer, but what if it were Matt who suddenly -

But I had cut free of him, damn him! He wasn't any concern of mine!

'How it works is this,' Mr Ten Eyck said, and he was every dull lecturer I ever sat through in all my years at Teacher's College, 'first, we have to get facts for the coroner's jury. Second, if it looks like somebody special did it, we have to make out a case against him so he can be arraigned and held for Grand Jury indictment.' He cleared his throat. 'Now, what I would like you to understand is that because I am one of you, so to speak, like a friend I would like you to cooperate. If we can put a case together that makes sense, well and good. If not, I am afraid there is going to be a lot of upset here.'

'Could there be any more than there is now?' my mother said.

'There could be a lot more, Lucille. When this case goes to the District Attorney the County Detective moves in. That will probably be Terhoven for this case, and he's a tough man. But if I can go to him and say, this is the case, it all adds up one, two, three, you can avoid having him push you around. I'm being honest about this; I want you to be the same. Terhoven is not a pleasant character; cut him loose on an investigation, and next you know everybody's dirty linen is flapping on the clothes-line. Is that understood?

'Well now,' he waved a piece of paper at my mother, and I saw it was the note found in Kate Ballou's house. 'You say, Lucille, you positively recognize this handwriting as Bob's?'

'There isn't a question about it, Morten.'

Mr Ten Eyck suddenly wheeled on Bob. 'Then why do you keep saying you didn't write this?'

'I didn't! I swear I didn't!'

‘And it also matches the writing in the account books you showed me. Why is that?’

‘I don’t know. But I didn’t write it. I wasn’t near her house last night.’

Matt slowly walked toward Mr Ten Eyck. ‘Do you mind if I take a look at that note?’

‘If you stop right there,’ Mr Ten Eyck said, ‘and keep your hands right where they belong.’ He held the note up toward Matt. ‘Now, do you have any opinions?’

‘Well,’ Matt said thoughtfully, and studied the paper as if he were examining each word in detail. He suddenly turned to Bob. ‘Why didn’t you sign it?’ he asked.

‘I did!’ Bob shouted. ‘I’m sure I did!’ and then his voice choked off, and for tick after tick the only sound in the room was that clock on the mantelpiece.

Junie was the first one to react, and she did it violently. ‘You filthy scum!’ she screamed at Matt, and in the same instant she dashed at him, her arms out, her fingers clawing. Someone met her with a jolt before she could get at him, and then as I went staggering I realized with astonishment that I was the one who had thrown myself at her. Now Morten had an arm around her and was dragging her back with everyone else watching stupefied, and all the time she cursed Matt with an insane ferocity. Word after word that she dragged up from the bottom of the Five Corners’ lexicon. Then Bob had his arms around her and she went to pieces there, hitting at his chest with her fists and sobbing over and over, ‘You didn’t do it, Bob! I know you didn’t! Tell them you didn’t!’

It was terrible to watch, even more terrible the way Mr Ten Eyck watched Bob over Junie’s shoulder.

‘So you admit you wrote that note,’ Mr Ten Eyck said in a flat voice.

‘Sure, I wrote it! But I didn’t kill her! I wouldn’t do anything like that!’

'The note says that you were calling her, and that you would be back again. You put the note in the door, and then you ran away because you were afraid somebody might know who you were, like Dick here. But you came back later, and you saw the lady then. Isn't that so?'

'No! I didn't come back. I never saw her at all last night.'

'No? Then why did you threaten you would?'

'I didn't threaten anybody. I just wanted to get the money she owed on her bill. When she came by the store Thursday she said she was moving back to New York over the weekend, and she wanted to close her account. Then I couldn't seem to get in touch with her, so I started to worry. You know how people are. So I called a few times, and then I figured maybe the phone wasn't working right or something, and I left the note I had to see her. But I didn't go back, and I didn't see her.'

'That's a pretty fancy note to leave for collecting a bill.'

'I only wanted her to pay what she owed. You know how people are. So I started to worry. . . .'

'You already said that.'

'But I didn't go back again and I never saw her. Why would I want to do anything to her? Why couldn't it be that guy who was in the house when I left the note?'

Morten gaped at him. I suppose we all gaped at him then.

'"That guy who was in the house"?' Morten echoed foolishly. 'You mean there was somebody in the lady's house when you were there? Who was it? Do you know him?'

'I don't know him, but he was there all right.'

'So,' Morten said with sudden craftiness. 'But how would you know he was there unless you were in the house, too?'

Bob pulled himself free of Junie and looked at Morten with some scorn. 'You don't have to be in a house to know if somebody's there when you can see him through the door. This guy was right there, right on the other side of the

door when I shoved the note into it. There's only this thin curtain. . . .'

'It's a glass curtain,' Junie cut in eagerly.

'Whatever it is. Anyhow, there's this curtain, and you can see through it a little. And there was this guy right inside, only when I put my face to the glass to make out who it was he pulled away quick. After that, I figured she probably had a date or something and it was no time to be butting in, so I just took off.'

'You ran away.'

'No, I didn't. I walked, like anybody else would.'

'You walked like anybody else. And you happened to leave the note there like anybody else, even if you didn't expect to come back.'

'I didn't even think of the note.'

'Your mind must be very busy when you walk like anybody else.'

'I swear I'm telling the truth, Mr Ten Eyck. Why don't you believe me!'

'Well now,' said Mr Ten Eyck, 'since you put it to me so nice I'll tell you why. It's because you're lying. You're not lying so good, but I have to say you're trying hard every step of the way. You are ready to knock down the lady's house for a bill of maybe a few dollars. You write a note, and then change your mind, but you still leave the note. And then for a witness we have this mystery man behind the door. Of all, I think he is the hardest thing to swallow.'

'You don't believe him because you don't want to believe him!' Junie burst out. 'But there *was* somebody there, and I can tell you who it was even if I wasn't there myself.'

My mother went to her before Mr Ten Eyck could open his mouth to answer this. 'Junie,' she said gently, 'if you'd only understand that there's nothing to get excited about. All Mr Ten Eyck is trying to do . . .'

'Excuse me, Mrs Ayres, but there's a lot for Bob and me

to get excited about.' She looked around at all of us, and I saw then that she must have put on mascara the first thing in the morning because there were two black tracks marking the tear stains on her cheeks. 'When there's any kind of trouble none of you have to give a damn about it because you're Nicholas Street, and you don't even know what trouble is! But Bob and I are just dirty, rotten Five Corners, aren't we? And if there's any kind of stick-up or murder or anything, you know damn well we did it, didn't we!'

'Look, girl,' Mr Ten Eyck managed to get in, 'we aren't saying you did anything. . . .'

'You don't have to say it. Not when it's written all over your stupid faces that you think it.'

'Junie!' my mother said, shocked.

'Well, you are thinking it, aren't you?'

'And maybe it would change our minds', Mr Ten Eyck said angrily, 'if you told us a little more about that man in the house you know so much about.'

'I couldn't tell you half as much as he could himself,' Junie said slowly, and she was looking squarely at Matt now. 'Could I, Mr Chaves?' she asked sweetly.

Matt's face was impassive. 'Are you saying that I was in Miss Ballou's house last night, Junie?' There wasn't a shade of anger or irony or incredulity in the way he said it. It was a polite question, as if he had overheard something and now wanted to learn what it was.

'I'm saying just that, Mr Chaves.'

'Are you sure of this?' Mr Ten Eyck demanded.

'If you mean, was I there and saw him, I already told you no. But I'll swear on the Bible it was Mr Chaves, and anything that happened to Miss Ballou, he did it!'

'But how do you know?' Mr Ten Eyck persisted.

'Because of the way he's been carrying on today, that's how I know! When he knew I was going over there this morning he was all pins and needles for me not to. He'd do

anything to keep me from going over there in that cellar, because he knew all along that she was laying there dead! He even locked me out of the attic when I went to get the key to go over there, only afterward he lost his nerve and tried to pull a bluff about it. He's smart, all right, but he's not smart enough to get away with that kind of stuff!

Mr Ten Eyck turned grimly to Matt. 'Is this true?'

Matt's face was still blank as stone. 'Unfortunately for the Five Corners minority', he said, 'it isn't.'

It was cruel, that facility he had in flicking the whip on a person's emotional hide, and I don't know who was stung more just then: Junie, who must have felt he was laughing at her, or Mr Ten Eyck, who must have felt that somehow he was supporting Junie's charge of prejudice. It was Mr Ten Eyck who got in the first word.

'Well now,' he said coldly, 'this is very interesting, this business of the key. Maybe we ought to clear it up right now. Do you think you could, my friend?'

Although the question was directed at Matt it was Junie who instantly started talking away a mile a minute, and so confusingly that even I couldn't make heads or tails of what she was saying. But then my mother cut in, and while she has a way of lingering over the smallest details for an uncomfortable length of time she has a sound memory. When she finished, Mr Ten Eyck nodded his head understandingly.

'I see,' he said, 'so it could be that our friend here locked the attic as a practical joke – or maybe for more serious reasons. Now could you tell me which it was,' he said to Matt.

Out of a clear sky my brother said, 'He can't tell you.'

Mr Ten Eyck sounded completely bewildered and angry now. 'He can't?'

Dick swallowed hard. 'No, because he didn't lock the attic. I did.'

My mother said wildly, 'You did?' and Dick flinched at

the sound of her voice. 'But you said you went right out of the house after breakfast!'

'I didn't mean I ran right out of the house like that,' Dick said impatiently. 'I didn't feel so good so I hung around upstairs a little, and then I remembered Miss Ballou said she had some good records over there, and that I could borrow them any time I wanted. Only, I knew she wasn't home so I figured I'd get Junie's key.'

'But all this business of locking the attic,' Mr Ten Eyck said. 'All this practical joking . . .'

'I wasn't playing any joke. It was just I heard Junie coming upstairs, and I got scared she'd find me there and wouldn't like it. I shut the door before I even thought of it.'

Mr Ten Eyck shook his head uncomprehendingly. 'But if you wanted that key so much why didn't you ask for it?'

Dick looked shamefaced. 'Because I knew my mother wouldn't like me to go over there. I just didn't want her to find out. There's no crime in that, is there?'

'Oh, Dick,' mother said wearily, 'you ought to know me better than that.'

Mr Ten Eyck brushed her aside. 'So it was you up in that attic and not Mr Chaves here.'

'That's right.'

Mr Ten Eyck looked at him narrowly. 'How did you know what key to look for?'

Dick licked his lips. 'I - well, I figured it would look like the key to our side door. It should, shouldn't it?'

'Maybe yes, and maybe no. Now, tell me, where did you find this key?'

Dick looked around at us helplessly. 'I don't understand.'

'I think you do. What part of the room did you find the key in? Under the bed? On the ceiling?'

'Oh,' Dick said with an air of surprise, and for a long minute his hand strayed worriedly over his face. 'Oh, that?'

I think it was in the dresser drawer. I mean, I'm sure it was. The top drawer of the dresser.'

'You're sure?'

'I - Yes, I'm sure.'

He was so pitifully shaken and uncertain that I felt achingly sorry for him, even though the picture of him fumbling through Junie's private belongings, whatever the reason, was an unpleasant one. But I felt even more sorry for him when Mr Ten Eyck suddenly turned to Junie and said, 'Is that where you keep the key?' and she answered with absolute triumph in her voice, 'No, it's *never* there. It's right on a hook on the wall near the door so I won't forget it when I go over to Miss Ballou's.'

Dick's lips moved feebly, but nothing came out.

'Were you in that room?' demanded Mr Ten Eyck.

Dick shook his head almost imperceptibly, and mother cried, 'Dick, why did you say you were? Why do you want to get mixed up in all this!'

It was as if she had suddenly jolted the life back into him.

'I don't care!' he shouted. 'I don't believe Matt did it! Now you're all trying to pin it on him, but he wouldn't do anything like that. You know he wouldn't!'

Mr Ten Eyck looked furious. 'So you think it's better to lie about it, to mix everything up at such a time!'

'I only wanted to help him.'

'Why should you want to help him? Don't you think he can take care of himself?'

'I don't know. All I know is he didn't do it!'

'And why are you so sure about that?'

'Because he isn't that kind. He's funny about a lot of things, but he wouldn't kill anybody. And he'd never want to hurt Miss Ballou. He even said her life was a mess, and all he'd do was pity her. You don't talk like that about someone you want to kill, do you?'

I was having my lesson thrown into my face by my own brother. He had never known Matt as I did, he could never be as close to him as I was, and yet he was saying out loud before everyone what I should have been saying. And listening to him I hated him and loved him for it.

'Well, do you!' he demanded to Mr Ten Eyck.

It was clear that it was taking Mr Ten Eyck an effort to keep his exasperation bottled up. 'Well now,' he said, 'I am sure that you read a lot of books on psychology, Dick, and you must be very smart in it. But I want to tell you one thing. And', he said pointedly to the rest of us, 'this goes for all of you. A woman has been killed. I do not think murder is cute like it says in some of those detective books which people read who have never seen a man lying dead with a bullet in him, or his skull split open with an axe, or maybe a woman with her neck broken by somebody.

'And I don't think it's cute to lie about things and mix them up so that maybe whoever did it can walk away and do it again sometime when he feels like it. I mean this. I think you should know that, and I think you should respect it.'

Stuffy little man that he was, he could be impressive at times. Of us all only Matt seemed to be unimpressed.

'All right,' he said brusquely, 'then getting down to cases on this signature business I'd like to point out that there's a big difference between the impression made by a signed letter and an anonymous letter. And anyone smart enough to know that could figure this note would catch up with Bob sooner or later, which it did, and when it did it would automatically make him look guilty as hell.'

'If somebody is trying to pin this on me,' Bob said in a choked voice. 'That guy behind the door. If I could only get my hands on him . . .'

'Oh,' said Mr Ten Eyck, 'so now we're back to the mystery man.'

‘There was somebody there, Mr Ten Eyck. I swear there was.’

‘Well now, you swear to everything so easy, boy, I would like to think once or twice before believing it. Even more, I’d like us to do what we came for. As much as possible I want to reconstruct this business so I can see for myself what everybody is talking about. If we go in the driveway and have everybody do what they say they were doing maybe all this stuff about doors and notes and mystery men will make some sense.’

‘In the driveway!’ my mother said, horrified. ‘With everybody in the street standing there . . .’

Mr Ten Eyck sighed. ‘I’ll tell them to go away,’ he said.

CHAPTER 3

THEY were all out there as mother had known they would be, and Mr Ten Eyck did tell them to go away. It wasn’t easy – Mrs McIntyre was especially sharp about it – but they finally went, and left us alone in the driveway there.

It was very hot and still now. The sky was stretched tight without a cloud in it, and when I looked at our car parked in front of the house I could see the heat waves rippling over it without a break. Her car – Kate Ballou’s huge roadster – was in the garage, and I wondered what would become of it now. And what would become of those fine things that had always seemed to me a natural part of her – the jewellery, the pictures on the walls, the clothes in the closets. Somehow, it would have seemed right just to lock the door of that house and to let it stay like that until it all crumbled away and nothing was left. But it could never be done like that. Kate Ballou was dead and gone, but the things she left behind still had a life to live. They were more

real than she was now. She would just be a name on some paintings and letters and documents, but they would be given away or sold, and would be the only things left of her that you could put your hand on.

Matt once said, 'I remember the first time I met Kate. She came into Wallace's office, and there were four or five of us sitting around there, and she had that mink coat on. Not the one she has now, I suppose, but the one before it. Anyhow, I had just learned the facts of life about mink and knew a good one when I saw it, and I remember thinking that this baby cost more money than I was going to make that year.

'And you know what she did? She pulled it off and tossed it back into a corner. Wherever Mr Gunther and Mr Jaeckel were that moment they must have felt the room tottering around them, but the coat bothered her, and the handiest thing to do was toss it aside, and that's what she did.'

'Admirable,' I said. 'Of course, she wasn't trying to make an impression on anyone, was she?'

'That was my first guess, too, but I was wrong.'

'Oh, you were.'

'The wrongest kind of wrong. The more I came to know her, the more I came to know that the way she handled that coat was Kate Ballou through and through. And she's that way about everything she owns except paintings. I don't mean her commercial stuff, I mean the gallery work she paints or collects. But everything else is something to use, to get a kick out of, and to toss aside whenever you feel like it.'

'And that to you is an enviable quality?'

'Don't you see why?'

'I guess I'm pretty obtuse, but I don't see why.'

'You are pretty, and you are obtuse, but we'll let that pass. The fact is that Kate is bigger than anything she owns. It's a subtle point, but if you strain you'll begin to get it.'

She's bigger than her furs, or her car, or her pretty house on Nicholas Street, or anything else she holds title to. She *herself* is the big thing. She's an accepted artist who's doing good and will do better, and she can say, "I'm big, and therefore I have these things", not "I have these things, and therefore I'm big". It's only little people without any real meat to them who have to say, "Don't look at me; look at what I own".

'I can't even say that, Matt. What do I own?'

'You own me, darling. Just stick along with me, and you'll wear rags.'

'Oh, fine,' I said.

'And love it.'

So Kate Ballou said, 'I'm big', but now she was small. Smaller than the smallest thing in the world which had life in it. Smaller than that ant there, busily moving along the crack in the concrete, and then on to the scorching concrete itself, and then suddenly gone under a monstrous shoe. Crushed flat, and gone.

I must have cried out, because they were all looking at me. And Dick lifted his shoe away from the tiny splotch on the concrete as he turned toward me, his face worried.

'What's wrong, sis?'

'That ant!' I said, and then, 'Nothing. Nothing at all's wrong.'

'You sounded as if something scared you silly. And you look funny. Don't you feel well?'

It struck me that he didn't look well himself, that none of them did. 'Oh, I feel fine!' I said. 'I feel just dandy!'

Mr Ten Eyck looked at me over his glasses. 'Now, now, Bettina, you know this blowing up doesn't help things any.'

'All right,' I said, 'I'm sorry.'

My voice said clearly enough that I wasn't, but he let it go at that and turned to Dick. 'Dick,' he said, 'I want you

to go to the garage where you were when you saw Bob. And Bob will go to the side door there and do over whatever he did last night. I mean, knocking at the door, and writing the note, and the way he looked at this mystery man he says was there, and so on. And you,' he said to Matt. 'I'd like you to do something, too.'

'What?'

'I want you to go inside there right by the door, and stand there. Just as if you heard somebody at the door, and you put your face there to see who it was.'

'I see,' said Matt. 'And what happens when Bob identifies me, and then I bring twenty witnesses from the ferry to prove I was there when all this was going on?'

'What happens later is your business, my friend. First, we'll try it my way.'

The key did not work easily, but finally Mr Ten Eyck shoved the door open, and Matt walked inside. Then the door was pulled shut and locked again while Bob took his position outside it, and Dick, his feet dragging, moved to the garage.

'Now,' Mr Ten Eyck said to Bob, 'you came to the door here, and you thought maybe somebody was home. Then what did you do?'

'I rang the bell.' Bob put his thumb against the bell, and I could hear the thin tinkle of it from the kitchen. 'I held on and rang pretty steady, but nobody came.'

'What did you do then? Knock?'

Bob looked shocked. 'At that hour? It must have been around ten o'clock. Anyhow, I could hear the bell was ringing. There wasn't any sense knocking, was there?'

'All right, so you just rang. Then what?'

'Well, then I figured out about the note. I mean, I'd leave a note so she'd know to get in touch with me before she left town for good. So, I did.'

'You had paper and pencil right with you?'

'It wasn't anything special. I always have them with me.'

'Do you have them with you right now?'

Bob's hands went slowly to his pockets and then dropped limp at his side. His face was sick. 'No, but the way you came to the house . . . I mean the way you jumped on me all of a sudden about Miss Ballou being killed and all. I didn't even have time to get my shirt buttoned, the way you did it!'

Mr Ten Eyck said dryly, 'You mean, if I hadn't walked in on you like I did you would have taken paper and pencil with you to go pitch ball this afternoon.'

'I didn't say that! It's just during work days I always have them with me! I have to have them for orders and stuff!'

'You don't have to get excited, Bob.'

'Well, the way you twist and turn everything, and make me out to be a liar all the time . . . !'

'Nobody makes you out to be a liar when you tell the truth. Now, we'll let it go at that, and here's pencil and paper I happen always to have with me. And I mean any-time I put my pants on I have them with me.' Bob took the little pad and stub of pencil as if they were hot, and Mr Ten Eyck made an impatient gesture. 'Just write the note the way you did last night.'

'I don't remember exactly what I said.'

Mr Ten Eyck opened the note and while Bob rested the pad against the wall of the house and scribbled away he read aloud: '*You said not later than tonight so I have been calling you. I will be back again.*'

'And I signed it,' Bob said.

'All right, then sign it.'

Mr Ten Eyck took back his pencil and pad and watched closely as Bob folded the new note carefully in half and then in half again. It fitted tightly into the crack of the doorway, and then Bob stepped back. 'That's how it was.'

'And then?'

'And then just as I was stepping away like this I thought I saw a face at the door inside. So I took a close look, and I knew there was somebody standing there. Like Mr Chaves is.'

Mr Ten Eyck looked at the shadow of Matt's head behind the curtain on the door, and then looked at Bob. 'You mean even in the dark – you said it was late at night – and through this screen door and the curtain you could make out a man's head there?'

'It wasn't as dark as all that. I could write the note, couldn't I? There must have been some light!'

'Out here, yes. The streetlight, moonlight, sure. But behind that curtain, my friend, you wouldn't have any such light.'

'Then there was some kind of light inside the house. There must have been! Maybe not big like a kitchen light, but some kind of lamp in the dining-room or somewhere so that it wasn't all dark.'

'I see. Now there was a lamp on.'

'There had to be!'

'Oh, for the sake of your story, yes. But for the sake of the cold facts, maybe there wasn't.' Mr Ten Eyck nodded toward the door. 'Meanwhile, granting there was somebody there, would you say it was our friend who's standing there now?'

Bob peered at the curtain, moving his head up and down studying it. 'How can I be sure? You can hardly make out anything the way that curtain and screen door are.'

'But you knew it was a man.'

'It looked like a man,' Bob said warily. 'There's something about the way a man's head is, the hair-cut and everything. Anyhow, I think it was a man. I'm almost sure of it.'

'Almost?'

'Well, you only want me to say what I'm sure about, don't you?'

From behind the door Matt said in a muffled voice, 'Say, when do I get out of here?' and Mr Ten Eyck opened the door and then closed it again behind Matt as he stepped out, but always keeping his eyes on Bob.

'Now,' he said to Bob, 'what happened next?'

'I walked away, that's all. I went right home.'

Mr Ten Eyck gestured toward Junie. 'You didn't stop to visit with your young lady?'

'No. I was going to pitch today. Any time I'm going to pitch I like to get a lot of sleep the night before.'

'So you just walked away and went home.'

'That's right.'

Mr Ten Eyck turned triumphantly toward Dick, who was standing there in the doorway of the garage. 'Dick, didn't you tell me you saw Bob run away? And he ran so fast you couldn't even catch him if you wanted to!'

'No,' Dick said flatly.

Mr Ten Eyck's jaw dropped. 'No?'

'I didn't say it was Bob. I only said I saw somebody running away, but I don't know who it was.'

'He says he was here himself! He says it was light enough to write a note! And you - thirty-forty feet away - you didn't know who it was?'

'No.'

'You're lying for him! What is it between you two?'

'I'm not lying for him. I'm just not sure.'

'No,' Mr Ten Eyck said grimly, 'nobody is sure of anything around here. But if you think you protect a man this way you are all mistaken.' He glared at Bob. 'I'll tell you right now that all this lying and evasiveness is worse for you than anything else.'

Bob's voice rose shrilly in panic like a woman's. 'I'm not lying!' he cried. 'All I said was I walked away. Like this!' He started slowly down the driveway toward the street, his eyes fixed on Mr Ten Eyck behind him. 'That's all I said!'

And then suddenly with a fantastic burst of speed he was racing down the driveway, and then around into the street and out of sight.

We stood there thunderstruck, and the first one to come to life was Mr Ten Eyck. 'Jesus!' he shouted, and started down the driveway, but before he had taken two steps Junie grabbed at his arm and almost spilled him. He tried to wrench free, but she clung to him with one hand, striking at him with the other fist.

'If you hurt him!' she sobbed. 'If you hurt a hair on him I'll kill you!'

'Let go!' shouted Mr Ten Eyck. 'You think you're helping him this way!' He managed to pull loose, and then saw, as we all did, it would be a hopeless chase. He stood there breathing hard as he faced Junie. 'If anything happens to that boy you can blame yourself, young lady.'

'You scared him to death!' Junie stormed. 'What did you expect him to do!'

Mr Ten Eyck ignored her. 'Dick,' he said, 'I want you to drive me over to the station house. I'll have to get a couple of men on the job.' He was almost down the driveway with Dick when he suddenly turned around to face us. 'And all of you, you be where I can find you. All of you!' he said.

CHAPTER 4

WE went into the house together, all of us, I thought, and then I realized Matt was not there. He had been in the driveway near me when I walked into the house, and now he was gone. I went to the kitchen window that overlooked the driveway, but he was not outside there. I ran through the house to the porch with a strange little fear rising in me, but he was nowhere in sight on the street. Mr Ten Eyck had

told him to stay, but he was a little law unto himself was Matthew Chaves, and he came and went as he chose.

If I had told him to stay . . . ? But I hadn't. This morning I had told him to go. I had told him we were finished. I had told him that for all his fine, smooth, well-rounded words he was hard and arrogant and rotten, and that any woman who loved him could never be more than a satellite revolving prettily around him no matter what crazy course he took, even if it led to hate and depravity and wrecked lives.

So he had gone. But, of course, he had to leave a legacy. The paunch and jowls I would marry until I became disgusted with them, and ran back to him so that we could pick up where my father and Kate Ballou had left off! In this world of conceited men there never has been one or could be one to match the conceit of Matt Chaves.

I sat in the living-room with my back straight and my hands clasped on my lap, and I watched the minute hand of the clock crawl around. *Oh, why don't you cry, cry, cry, Bettina*, the clock kept saying.

But he'd love that, wouldn't he? Only Jonathan-out-of-a-dream knew how to be warm and tender in the face of a woman's tears. And it didn't have to be someone with paunch and jowls for Bettina Ayres; there were Jonathans in Sutton, too. And if not here, somewhere else. If she were half what Matt Chaves said she was, she could have one any time she put her mind to it. Anyhow, the part of her mind that wasn't filled with Matt Chaves.

Then I *had* to forget him! Even if he were standing there right in front of me . . .

'Betty,' Matt said. 'No, sit down, you idiot, you look as if you're ready to pass out! Can I get you something? Can I do anything?'

'Matt. Oh, damn you, Matt, where were you! No! Don't tell me, I don't want to know. I don't want to hear anything about it!'

'Will you please take your hands away from your ears and stop shaking your head that way! You're working yourself into a state for nothing, Betty.'

'I don't want to hear anything! And keep your hands off me!'

His hands around my wrists were like iron bands charged with electricity. I wanted to throw them off, but I couldn't.

He half dragged me to my feet and shook me. 'What's wrong? Did something happen while I was away?'

'No! Just let me be.'

He didn't. He held me so close and tight that I knew my back would be bruised tomorrow, and I could feel the damp sweatiness of his chest through my dress.

'Betty, do you know how your hair smells?'

I held myself rigid. 'No. But you smell from sweat and dust, and it isn't very pleasant.'

'That's bound to happen when you run around in this kind of weather.'

'Run around where?'

'I went over to see the baseball game.'

'Baseball game!' This time I succeeded in pulling away from him, and all the murder in me must have showed in my eyes. 'You mean, with everything that's happened, with Kate Ballou dead, you went to see a baseball game!'

'I didn't go to see the game. I went to see Bob Macek - and I did.'

I couldn't grasp that at once. 'But Bob Macek - but he ran away! They must be looking for him now!'

'And when he gets home they'll find him there. He left the club-house with me.'

'How did you know he'd be at the game?' I asked accusingly.

'Oh, it's no plot or anything, if that's what you mean. Call it a hunch, or whatever you will, but when he took off

the way he did, it struck me that the one place he'd head for would be that game.'

'But why?'

'Because he had all the ego kicked out of him, and he was going to the one place where it could be built up again. It may sound cockeyed, but if he had really done something wrong he'd be just the kind of guy to stand there and try to brazen it out in his dull-witted way. But the only thing he did wrong was to get himself scared silly by our equally dull-witted and highly prejudiced friend, Ten Eyck.'

'Oh, so you happen to know that Bob Macek isn't guilty.'

'I knew it before he even took off the way he did. Talking to him just verified what I had already figured out.'

'And what makes you so sure?'

He took a deep breath. 'I know who did it, Betty.'

I said something, and then realized the word had not been spoken out loud. I cleared my throat. 'Who?' I said hoarsely.

He looked at me steadily, his face that damned blank mask he affected.

'Don't you even want to know what Bob told me, Betty?'

'I want to know who did it!'

He said evenly, 'Listen to this, Betty. Somehow or other, Bob had gotten to talking with Kate about his baseball team, and she had promised – because she liked him, out of a whim, whatever it was – to advance a thousand dollars to the team for uniforms and fixing up the grounds. Not really a gift, you see, but a sort of long-term loan to be paid back whenever the club could manage to do it, if it ever could. And when she closed her account at the store last week and said something about giving up her house, he got scared she'd forget about the money.'

'It was to be a whole big deal. One day the fans were going out to the ball park, and there would be the team in brand-new uniforms, and the stands all painted up, and

it would be just like the Yankee Stadium that Bob is always dreaming about. Only if Kate went away without giving him that money the dream would go *pop*. Don't you think it's amusing, Betty, that a man should find himself neck-deep in murder because he has a dream, but he's ashamed to talk about it in public where people might laugh at it?'

'I think you're trying to get away from answering me, Matt. Who did it?'

'I don't have to answer that, Betty. You've given up all claims on me.'

'I have,' I said defiantly. 'And if you think you're going to blackmail me into saying things are going to be the way they always were between us . . .'

He said, 'I wasn't trying to blackmail you. I was saying good-bye. And I'd like to see your father and Dick before I go.'

'You can't go without telling me what you know! And Dick isn't even home yet.'

'I'd like to shower and change into my stuff. I can wait in his room.'

He was going up the stairs now. I was going to call after him, but I didn't. I didn't want to know the answer now. I was suddenly afraid of what it might be. And he was at the head of the stairs now, turning out of my sight.

Matt! Can't you understand? Can't you see why we don't belong together!

But I didn't say it. And he was out of my sight now.

Tick, said the clock as it started to strike six: Miss Prim, Miss Prim, Miss Prim . . .

PART FIVE · *Richard*

CHAPTER 1

HE was there when I walked into my room, squatting beside the wastepaper basket and studying a piece of broken phonograph record he had taken from it. I let the door close behind me, and stood watching him.

‘What are you looking for, Matt?’

He didn’t even seem bothered at being caught poking and prying. ‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘Nothing at all I really expected to find.’ He was twisting and turning the broken piece of record trying to make out what it said on the torn part of label left on it. ‘Ravel’s *La Valse*,’ he said. ‘One of your favourites, wasn’t it?’

‘I don’t care for it any more.’

‘Oh?’ He squinted up at me curiously. ‘Why not?’

‘I just don’t.’

He shrugged and tossed the piece of record into the wastebasket. When he stood up I saw that he was wearing his old tee-shirt and moccasins and had that damp, shiny look of having just bathed.

‘Going back to the ferry now?’ I asked.

‘I’m going, but not back to the ferry.’

‘Then where?’

‘Away. Maybe New York, maybe San Francisco, maybe Tierra del Fuego. But far away from Sutton and its teeming hundreds.’

‘But Bettina,’ I said. ‘What about her?’

‘I’m afraid she wants to be reckoned among the teeming hundreds. I’ve already said good-bye to her. I was just waiting to say it to you.’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘Well – good-bye.’

He went to the door and then stopped there, leaning back against it lazily. ‘I don’t suppose our friend, Ten Eyck, will need me any more. But if he does . . .’

'He won't,' I said. 'They caught Bob Macek again. Somebody went to his house, and there he was. I was just leaving the police station when they brought him in.'

'And that's that,' Matt said. He put a hand on the door-knob, but let it rest there. 'Oh, I almost forgot to thank you for what you did. I mean, standing up for me, and saying you were up in the attic, and all that. It was decent of you to do it.'

'I suppose I made a fool out of myself,' I said, 'but I don't care. Mr Ten Eyck was crazy to start suspecting you.'

'Yes,' Matt said, 'but only you and I know that, Dick.' And then his hand was no longer on the door-knob, but on the key, and he twisted it with a sharp little gesture so that I heard the bolt slide home with a flat click.

My fists knotted up, and I could feel every muscle in my body tighten behind them. I took one step toward him, and then I said, 'What do you mean by that?' but very softly so that no one outside could hear me.

He didn't move. He still leaned back against the door, and the way he looked made me think of one of those Siamese cats, all light eyes in a dark face and a hateful arrogance gleaming in them.

'All right,' he said, 'I'll tell you what I mean if you answer one question.'

'Yes?'

'Did you know your father and Kate Ballou were having an affair?'

'My father and Kate Ballou! An affair!'

'You're big enough to understand what I'm saying even if I don't draw you any diagrams, sonny. In fact, you're big enough so that I'll feel a lot more comfortable if you don't come tiptoeing any closer. Just stay where you are, and we'll get along fine.'

'No,' I said. 'We won't get along fine, at all. You were told to get out of this house, weren't you? Now nobody

wants you around any more – my mother, Bettina, nobody! So you'll just make up some lies to get even for that, won't you!

'I'll be damned,' he said, and he sounded really surprised. 'So you didn't know.'

'Do you think talking like that will make me believe you?'

'He looked at me, and his eyes were narrowed like a cat's. 'If you didn't know, why did you do it? What crazy reason could there be to make you do it!'

'Do what!'

'You son of a bitch,' he said in a flat voice, 'you killed her. You got her in those big, clumsy hands of yours, and you broke her in half like a stick of wood. But why? Why did you do it!'

'I didn't!' I was close to him now. I was so close that if I swung my arm my fist would smash right into his face. 'But if you talk like that I'll kill you!'

'Why not? You already tried that once, didn't you?'

I wasn't pretending. I couldn't understand that, at all. 'I tried to kill you?'

'The unwilling witness,' he said. 'The clean, fine up-standing, unwilling witness. The boy who's smart enough to say he took the key, and then back out of it so that an extra load of suspicion is dumped on my head. The boy who's smart enough to say he saw Bob Macek running away, and then say he didn't see Bob Macek so that everybody wonders what kind of lie Bob is telling. It's a beautiful act, isn't it, that unwilling witness act, because it could shove Bob or me right into the electric chair and leave you looking like a best friend right up to where they pull the switch!'

'I was trying to help you!' I said. 'Now I'm sorry I did!'

'You hate my guts inside out, sonny. Maybe when you first knew me it was different, but once you saw where your mother stood you lined right up with her. You'd see me

boiled in oil before you'd lift a finger to help me. But it wasn't until you made one little slip that I fitted that into the picture, and it all started to make sense.'

'All right,' I said, 'if you think it makes so much sense why don't you go tell Mr Ten Eyck about it, instead of me?'

'In other words you'd like to find out just what I know and just what I still have to drag out of you. You've got a clever way of putting things, sonny. I think even your mother would be surprised to find out how smart her boy was.'

'You leave my mother out of this! And I wasn't trying to be smart. All I meant was you don't know anything because I didn't do anything!'

'Oh, yes, you did. When you were standing up so nobly to help me you said something that turned on a great, white light. The kind you see in comic strips with an electric bulb drawn around it and the word "Idea" in it. You told Ten Eyck that I said Kate Ballou had made a mess of her life, that, if anything, she was to be pitied. And do you know the funny thing about that? It was something I said for the first and only time to your sister the night before when we were in the kitchen together. And it was nothing she would ever discuss with you. No, there was a pair of ears against the kitchen door picking that tidbit up. Your ears, in fact.'

'I went down to get something to eat. There's nothing wrong with that, is there? Only when I heard you and Bettina there I didn't want to hang around!'

'And that shows good bringing-up, doesn't it? And it also showed me that around the time somebody killed Kate Ballou you were up and doing. After that I started thinking, I started putting little pieces of the picture together. When you came down to breakfast, for instance, you grabbed the newspaper right there at the table and started going through

it as if there was some big important news story you were afraid of missing.'

'A lot of people read the newspaper!'

'A lot of people do, but not you, Dick. No, this was the first time since I've known you that I've even caught you looking at the paper. But if you knew Kate Ballou was dead and that maybe the news had been broken you'd be in a sweat to see what the paper said, wouldn't you?'

'If I knew she was dead!'

'Oh, granted, but there's more to the picture than that. Much more. Like the little business of your mother's remarking something about my dirty shoes at the breakfast table, which made me remember that they were all dirtied up when I first put them on. Dirtied with black, sooty coal-dust stains. And since they were your new sneakers, and since this house uses a gas heating system while Kate's cellar is loaded with coal, it could be, it just could be, that those sneakers were over in her cellar the night before. With you in them, of course.'

'Do you think Mr Ten Eyck would even listen to this stuff?'

'I'm not interested in what Mr Ten Eyck would listen to. I'm only interested in putting together the little pieces. Like the one when you suddenly walked into the house the first time Ten Eyck was here, and we were all sitting around getting the law laid down.

'When you walked up to the house and saw the crowd here and all the excitement, did you stop to ask anyone what had happened? Did you rush into the house scared to death that something might have happened to anyone there? That would be the logical reaction for anyone breaking in on a scene like that. But all you did was show some annoyance because the lawn was getting mussed up. You weren't worrying about anything having happened to somebody in the house, to your mother, for instance, because you knew

damn well what had happened before anybody told you about it!’

I said, ‘Maybe you really think I did it, maybe you’re just trying to make trouble, I don’t know. But now I see why you’re talking to me like this, and not to Mr Ten Eyck. You know he wouldn’t believe any of this stuff!’

‘I told you I don’t give a damn whether he would or not. I know you did it. For all the shrewd way you twisted everything around I know you really did use that key from Junie’s room to get into Kate’s house, and this morning when the attic was locked it was just you trying to get the key back in place before Junie would find it was missing. And I know you did see Bob Macek walk away from that door, because you were the one behind the door all the time!

‘And I also know that you had that note from him in your hand, and that you tore his signature away. It’s not in any of your pockets or the wastepaper basket or around the driveway. But it’s somewhere around wherever you happened to throw it.

‘The only thing I don’t know is why you did it. But I’m going to find out. I’m dead serious, Dick. Before I get out of this room I’m going to know what went on between you and Kate Ballou.’

My arms were swinging easily at my sides, and my fists were so tight now that my fingernails were cutting into my palms.

I said, ‘You’d better go now, and not talk any more. I don’t like it.’

‘Why did you do it, Dick? Did you go over there to take something, and she caught you at it?’

I said, ‘I don’t come from the kind of place you do. I don’t go around stealing things.’

‘Were you in love with her, was that it? No, I’m not being sarcastic, Dick. You’re big enough and old enough to be as

much in love as anyone else in the world, and it can lead you to do queer things. Was it something like that?’

‘I hated her,’ I said.

He looked at me a long time. ‘Your mother’s son, all right,’ he whispered at last.

That was when I swung my fist at him. Not straight into the face because I didn’t want his head to bang back against the door where the sound could be heard, but in a sharp hook that would smash him down where I could really get at him. But he was a cat all right, all cat, and he moved so quickly that the punch didn’t land clean. It glanced along the side of his face, and I could feel the cheek tear under my signet ring. Then he half fell, half scrambled to the bed, and rolled over and across it to land on his feet on the other side, and stand there facing me before I could get at him again.

The cut on his cheek suddenly opened while he was standing there like that, and with a surprised gesture he put his hand up to it and then looked at his fingers. I was around the bed and close to him again, but he stepped back looking so bloody and beaten that I stopped short.

‘All right,’ I said, ‘now I’m telling *you*. Nobody wants you around here any more, not even my sister. So the best thing you can do is get out of Sutton and stay out. And any ideas you have about me you can take right with you.’

He had his hand at his cheek again, and then he held it out so that I could see the bloody marks on his fingers. ‘Look,’ he said, as if he couldn’t believe it himself.

I should have known him better. I dropped my eyes to look, and the next thing I knew, the edge of that hand hit my throat like an axe blade. I felt it was sinking in deeper and deeper, that it had suddenly taken a tight grip around my throat so that I was being strangled on my feet, but when I put up my hands to grab at it, it wasn’t there. Matt was standing back watching me, and as the pain reached down and tore into my chest and lungs I tried to say something

to him but couldn't. I went down to my knees, and while I was like that, trying to suck in a single drop of air, the heel of his moccasin struck me full against the jaw and I went over sideways on the floor.

The room was gauzy now, and he was just a shadow against the greyness, but I saw him move toward me and then like a miracle felt the air tear into my lungs. His feet were at my side now, and I grabbed for them with one arm. He went down, half on top of me, and with a furious kick freed one leg, but I tightened my grip around the other, and with my free arm I tried to catch him around the neck. On the first try my hand slipped away and caught the tee-shirt, ripping it down the back, but then I had a lock on his neck and I was squeezing it tight.

It was like trying to overpower an armful of hard rubber and steel springs, and I tried to roll over and get my weight on him, but every time I moved, his knees drove into my belly like pistons. Our heads were close together, and I could hear his breath starting to bubble between his lips. I knew if I could only hold that grip around his neck he'd go limp sooner or later, but just when I thought his body was beginning to sag I felt his hand probing at my face. Then I felt his thumb at my eye gouging into it with a savage intentness, and that was when I knew my first real fear of him.

He would blind me if he could, maim me if he could. And there was no way to stop him except to do as he wanted. Even if I could break and batter him there I had the sick feeling that he would not even care, but would come back again and again until it was his turn. He would never leave me alone. He would hunt me out day or night wherever I was, and then we would be locked together like this again.

And the strangest thing of all was that we fought in silence. I didn't want anyone to hear, and I think he felt the same way. So, pulling and beating at each other as we

were, we never spoke a word, we moved bodies and arms and legs to avoid the sudden clatter against furniture.

I pulled free of him and tried to come to my feet so that I could meet him upright, but he was quicker than I was. While I was still on my knees his fist drove into my face with the impact of a metal weight, and I almost went over backwards. Then I tried to grab at his arm, and when he pulled away I got to my feet facing him. He struck again and watched me as I swayed on my feet.

‘Dick,’ he whispered, ‘why did you kill her?’

I shook my head, and he struck again so that the room rose up and heaved about me.

‘Why did you kill her?’

I lurched at him, and this time his foot jammed hard into my shin so that a geyser of pain suddenly boiled up through my leg. I grabbed at it with both hands, and while I was doing this his fist moved so fast that I didn’t even see it. I only knew that I was mildly surprised when the room tilted sideways and the floor came up to hit me along the side of my head.

Then I thought it was the blood pounding through my head, but I realized it was someone knocking hard on the door. ‘Richard!’ my mother shouted from far away. ‘Richard, what’s going on in there!’

Matt’s feet were right next to my head now, and I knew what he was going to do. He was going to kick my face until there was nothing left but a bloody thing without eyes or nose or mouth. Until there was nothing left at all.

I tried to put my arms over my face to shield it, but he was kneeling next to me now, and he pushed them aside. His chest was heaving so that when he spoke, the words came out queer and broken.

‘Dick,’ he said, and it sounded as if he were saying a prayer, ‘Dick, if you tell me what happened I swear I won’t go to the police about it. But you’ve got to tell me, don’t

you understand, and you've got to tell your people, too. Will you do that?'

I tried to say, 'All right,' but I couldn't talk. I moved my head so that he could see what I meant.

He put his arms under my shoulders and sat me up like that with my back against the dresser. Then I saw that his whole face was smeared with blood, and his arms, and the torn piece of tee-shirt that was left on him. I must look like that, too, I thought, and my heart sank when I realized how my mother would feel when she saw me. But it was too late to do anything about it. Matt pulled open the door, and my mother ran in, and my father, and Bettina right after her.

'Richard!' my mother screamed. 'He's beaten you up! Oh, look at you. Harry, why don't you get the police! You stand there like that . . . !'

I shook my head even though it hurt bad to do it. 'No police,' I managed to say.

It was all I could say until they had me cleaned up a little and sitting in my armchair, and all of them standing around me, wondering. And then I found that it wasn't as hard to tell as I thought it would be. Not if you sat back with your eyes closed so that you couldn't see what they felt. Not if you kept your voice flat and even, so that you would be telling just what happened, and none of the feelings would come back to you.

CHAPTER 2

I WAS playing *La Valse* by Ravel when it started. I don't like most of Ravel's music, and the *Bolero*, which is all most people know about him, is very dull when you hear it a couple of times. But *La Valse* is different. I must have played it ten times since I got it the week before, and every

time I could get the same excitement from it. If I closed my eyes I could see old Vienna and a huge ballroom in it; not one of those movie ballrooms but bigger than your eyes could take in. The floor was like a mirror and it went out farther than you could see, and the pillars all around went up so high they disappeared into clouds. That was the picture.

Then people started to fill the floor. The women wore white swirling dresses, and the men wore uniforms of all colours. They danced, whirling around and around that ballroom, and all they knew was that this ballroom was the whole world, and they were happy dancing around in it.

And the way I saw it, the most beautiful woman dancing there was my mother, not the way she looked now, but much younger, the way she looked in the picture on my dresser. I didn't see her dancing with my father because he wouldn't have fitted, but she was dancing with someone else who wasn't important. And she and all the rest of them went around that room with the music.

But there was another world outside the ballroom, all wars and hate and trouble, and it started to push close around. Everything got dark as the smoke of the wars blew through the room, and the pillars were cracking and bending because they couldn't take the weight. And then everything came crashing down on the ballroom, and the music ended.

That was the way I saw it, and I was playing the records when I thought that perhaps my mother would like to come to my room and hear them because she never had. I went down the hall to her room, but when I got near the door I could hear that she and my father were arguing. It surprised me a little because they sounded so serious, and because she and my father never argued much. Most of the time he acted as if he didn't know she was around, or didn't care, and all she ever seemed to worry about was that no one should ever bother him or get in his way. When Bettina and

I were kids my mother was always saying, for one reason or another, 'Now, don't bother daddy with that nonsense, children. You know he doesn't like you in the way.' And then she'd try to make up to us for it so that we wouldn't feel hurt.

I was surprised now to hear them arguing like this, and I was going to turn around and go back to my room when suddenly I heard my mother say, *I'm going to that Ballou woman to settle things between you two*, and I stopped short. Then he answered something, and she said, *How do you think it feels when I see her bold as brass, laughing at me? Do you think there's any pleasure in my life with that filth under my nose!*

I stood there, and all I could think was, *My father! My father and that woman!* and it was like suddenly seeing him the way he really was. In front of the world he could be hard and cold, with a sharp tongue, and that way of not caring what happened to you, but where no one could see, he carried on with another woman, and the two of them could have a fine time laughing at my mother. The hardest thing to understand was that it was my father – who went down to the store every morning, and came home every evening with the newspaper under his arm, and who sat outside trying to paint, and who sometimes brought me things. It was like the outside world crashing down on the ballroom in that waltz.

I went back down the hall quietly so that they wouldn't know I had been there, and when I got into my room I shut the door tight behind me and then I took the record from the machine and I smashed it. There was another one in the album, and I took that out and smashed it, too. But even as I was picking up the little pieces and throwing them into my wastepaper basket I knew what I had to do. It was hard work getting the pieces up, my fingers were as cold and numb as if I had kept them in ice water for an hour, but

with each piece that I picked up and threw away I saw clearer and clearer what had to be done.

I would go to Miss Ballou and tell her she had to keep away from my father, that maybe it would be best for her to go away altogether so that there wouldn't even be any questions afterward. She might not like it, she might think I was a fresh kid talking out of turn, but I knew different. My father was doing wrong, and my mother was being hurt because of that, and there couldn't even be any argument about it. When I tried to picture how she would answer me it was hard to see her even being angry. Ashamed, maybe, but not angry.

I slipped on my sneakers and went downstairs and out across the alley. I rang the bell a couple of times, but she wasn't in. The house was dark and empty, and standing there I realized that she might not get in until the early morning. When she came up from the city you usually heard her car running into the garage about two or three in the morning. With that car if she started around midnight from New York she could avoid highway traffic and be up at Sutton in no time.

While I was standing there the side door of our house slammed, and my father came out and walked direct to the garage. There was a chance that he would see me standing in Miss Ballou's doorway when he backed the car out, so as soon as he started it up I ran across, but slipped on the driveway and he almost backed into me. I yelled, and he stopped the car, looking scared.

He said something, and I told him I was all right, but it was hard to get the words out. It made me sick just to look at him then, and think what he was really like, and I was glad when he didn't fuss around, but just drove away.

When I was back in my room I sat down and tried to get my thoughts straight. I could see her by luck sometime, and talk to her, but that wasn't what I wanted. It had to be

quick, as quick as possible. It had to be done and settled before anyone even knew about it. I knew Junie had a key to next door in her room; if I could get it I could be over there waiting when Miss Ballou came home.

Junie was out on the porch where she used to go every evening, so I went straight up to her room. I didn't have to hunt for the key; it was hanging on the wall, and there was a die cut on its head with 159 on it so that I knew it was for Miss Ballou's house. Then I went down to my mother's room and knocked on the door.

She was sitting up in bed reading, and when I told her I was going to sleep now she looked surprised. 'So early, Richard?' she said, and when I said I felt awfully tired, she said, 'Are you sure that's all? You look queer. You're not coming down with something, are you?'

I said, no, I was all right, and we kissed good night, and then I went back to my room and closed the door hard. I waited a couple of minutes, then turned the light out and tiptoed out, this time closing the door very quietly.

I was prepared to wait a long time in Miss Ballou's house, but I found that sitting in the dark there got on my nerves. When I looked at my watch, what I would have judged to be a couple of hours I had been waiting turned out to be about half an hour. So I turned on a little reading lamp in the living-room there, and I walked around trying to make out the pictures on the wall in the half-darkness.

That was when I heard the bell suddenly ring, and while my first thought was that Miss Ballou had come home I immediately realized she wouldn't be ringing her own bell. I went out to the kitchen and keeping my back against the wall I went down the couple of steps to the door, but couldn't make out who it was. There was a quick fear in my mind that it might be my father, and to make sure about that I put my face next to the curtain to see. Then I pulled away because it was only Bob Macek.

He pressed the bell again, and then tried to look through the curtains to see me, but I pushed myself back against the wall out of sight. He disappeared for a couple of minutes, and just as I was about to go back to the living-room he was there again and pushed something, a piece of paper, into the door. Then he went away for good, and I could hear his feet shuffling down the driveway.

It was a long wait after that, and most of it I spent walking around and around that living-room until I knew everything in it by heart. The few times I tried to sit down and relax I found I couldn't. I was wound up so tight that there was one moment when I was almost tempted to yell as loud as I could just so that I would know there was something alive in that house.

Then I heard the car in the driveway, and I knew from the sound it was hers. In the room I could see the reflection of the headlights on the window shades, and they stayed like that for a long time. There was someone with her, I could hear talk going on, and I hadn't reckoned on anyone being with her. It left me empty and uncertain inside, and that's how it was when she came in and saw me standing there in the kitchen waiting for her.

She was alone, I saw, and that made me feel better, but the first words she spoke there in the shadows set loose all the anger in me.

'Harry?' she said sharply. 'Is that you?'

'No,' I said, 'it's Dick. Dick Ayres,' and I could hear her draw a long breath. Then she moved forward with those sharp little steps of hers and pulled the cord to the kitchen light so that we stood there blinking at each other.

'You look so much like your father,' she said, and then put her hand up to her heart. 'What are you doing here, anyhow? There's nothing wrong, is there?'

'I just wanted to talk to you,' I said.

'How did you get in?'

'I used Junie's key. I had to see you as soon as you got home.'

'It must be pretty important.'

'It is,' I said. 'You'll know when I tell you.'

'Oh?' She looked at me curiously, and I looked back at her and saw that somehow she was not as young and pretty as I had always seen her. Her hair was tangled and blown about, and under the glare of the light her skin looked very pale and there were black shadows under her eyes. She caught the way I was looking at her, and laughed. 'I must look a mess. But if you'll excuse me a second . . .' She tossed her pocketbook on to the kitchen table, and took a chamois jewel bag from her pocket and laid that next to the pocketbook. Then she opened a slip of paper she had in her hand and read it, just glancing through it.

'Bob Macek was here,' she said with some surprise. 'Didn't you see him?'

'Yes. But I didn't want him to see me.'

She had thrown the note on the table and was pulling a comb from her pocketbook, but the way I spoke pulled her up short. She looked at me, frowning.

'What is this, Dick? Coming here at this hour, the way you talk, this whole thing. Are you in some kind of trouble?'

'No,' I said, 'you are. You and my father.'

'Oh.' She sucked in her lower lip and nodded thoughtfully. 'I see.'

'Is that all you can say?'

'No, I can also say that it's pretty late for children to be wandering away from their beds. If you see what I mean, Dick.'

'I didn't come here for you to laugh at me!'

She said wearily, 'I'm not laughing at you, Dick. Believe me, I've got damn little to laugh about lately. But if what you want me to do is say I'm sorry because your father and I have done something to hurt you, all right then, I'm sorry.'

‘Then you don’t understand,’ I said. ‘Because you’re not hurting me at all. You’re hurting my mother, and it’s got to stop. Right here and now it’s got to be finished!’

‘Your mother!’ she said, and suddenly her eyes were bright with anger. ‘Was she the one who told you about – about your father and me?’

‘Nobody told me anything. They were talking about it in their room, and I heard them.’

She sighed. With her eyes closed she ran her fingers slowly back and forth across her forehead as if there were a pain there she was trying to find.

‘So you heard them,’ she said. She held her hands out wide in a gesture of futility and then let them drop limp at her side. ‘And you found out. And it hurts you. And I’m sorry.’

‘That isn’t enough. That’s just talk, that being sorry stuff. I want you to quit having anything to do with him! I want you to go away and not see him again!’

‘*You* want!’ She looked at me as though I were crazy, and then suddenly she slammed her fist down on top of the kitchen table so hard that everything on it jumped. ‘How dare you talk like that to me!’

‘I’ve got every right!’

‘Oh, you have?’ Abruptly, she walked across the kitchen and down the three steps to the side door, and stood there facing me with her hand on the handle of the screen door. ‘If it comes down to rights, Reverend Davidson, I’ll tell you where I stand. I own this house, and you’re a trespasser, and I want you out. Out quick.’

I was wild with rage, but it was bottled in. I went across the kitchen, down the three steps, and I was close to her.

‘I wasn’t talking about sin,’ I said. ‘I wasn’t talking about doing wrong like that. My mother is the one who’s having the wrong done to her, and it’s got to stop!’

‘Get out,’ she said. ‘If you don’t I’ll raise a noise that’ll

bring the whole neighbourhood in here, and then you'll have something to be really sorry about. So get out!'

She meant it. I could see she meant it, and I could see it happening. Everyone running up, and my trying to explain, but not able to because I couldn't tell them what was really going on. I caught her around the shoulders to pull her away from the door before she could get it open, but her hand caught in the handle and when I dragged at her arm I could hear the wood crack on the door. She tried to scream, and I clapped my other hand over her mouth quick, and it was then I realized that in some crazy way I was fighting with her, that I didn't want to, but I was trapped there like that.

'Listen to me!' I said into her ear. 'Listen to me!' and all I could think of was that I had to get her away from that door, away from where somebody might hear us. I wrenched at her like that, one hand on her wrist, and one arm around her neck with my hand over her mouth, and suddenly she went limp. One minute her body had been thrust against mine, everything in it tensed and furious; the next minute she was sagging toward the floor as limp as a rag doll. I let my hands fall away from her, and then as I stood there and watched, driven into the floor like a dead stick, she leaned forward very slowly like someone in his sleep, and fell head-first down the cellar steps.

CHAPTER 3

I TOLD it to them with my eyes closed and with my voice flat and even, and all the while I was talking nobody moved or made a sound. Only when I was finished my mother made a moaning sound, and Bettina looked around as if she were waking up from a dream.

'Junie!' she said. 'She went down to the police station when she heard Bob was picked up again! She must be half-crazy down there. And Bob . . . ! I've got to call up!'

She was half-way to the door when my mother cried out, 'Bettina!' and she stopped dead in her tracks. 'You're not to move a step out of here. All this nonsense! The way the boy's been beaten up till he's out of his mind and doesn't even realize what he's saying. And you running right out . . . !'

Bettina looked at my mother strangely. 'You know he's telling the truth. You know every word of it was true. And those poor kids down at the police station with everyone hammering at them! How do you think they must feel . . . !'

The way she was talking scared me.

'Matt!' I said. 'Don't let her! You promised! You said you wouldn't go to the police, so you can't let her go either!'

'Thank God for that,' my mother said.

Bettina turned to Matt incredulously. 'You promised? What right did you have to promise anything like that?'

You could almost see the waves of feeling rising in the air between them. It was as if Bettina were trying to beat him down with her anger and was getting more furious each second because she was unable to get through his armour.

'I promised,' he said at last, and watching her I knew she would listen to him. 'It doesn't matter why, but I promised, and you're bound to it as much as I am.'

Bettina said, so that you could hardly hear her, 'And Bob and Junie? And this whole horrible business? You think you can just bury it this way?'

'I don't think anything like this can be buried. But I'm not going to do anything about it, and neither are you! Dick,' he said to me, 'don't you see there's only one answer? Don't you see that it's up to you and nobody else?'

I was in a whirlpool now, spinning around and going down, and all I had to hang on to was that promise. And he was trying to trick me out of it, pull it out of my hands.

‘No!’ I said. ‘You can’t make me!’

‘You’ve got to go to the police – to Ten Eyck. Just tell him what you told us here. Not with anybody dragging you there, but because you know you have to do it!’

‘No!’ I said. ‘It was an accident, but they won’t believe me. They won’t understand!’

My mother said angrily to Matt, ‘Of course, they won’t. Those stupid police, the way they carry on, never listening to a word you say to them. God knows what they’d make out of it!’

‘Stay out of this!’ he told her. ‘Dick,’ he pleaded, ‘listen to me. You can’t walk around with this kind of thing locked up inside you. Sooner or later it’ll tie you up in knots, it’ll drive you crazy. Tomorrow, the next day, the day after that, it gets worse and worse in you like a cancer. You can’t live with yourself like that.’

‘He can!’ my mother shouted. ‘He can if nobody knows! And if you hadn’t bullied him and tortured him like you did you wouldn’t even have known!’ She caught his arm and shook it savagely. ‘Well, would you!’

He pulled away as if her touch sickened him. ‘That’s right,’ he said to her, ‘the only sin in your book is being caught. The old Spartan code brought right up to date on Nicholas Street. Being caught, that’s the wicked thing, that’s the crime they hang you for!’

‘You knew all along about Harry and Kate Ballou, but your only fear was that someone who passed you on the street would know. You know what your son did and what it means, but all you worry about is that your neighbours might know. You kept building up a problem for your husband and your son until it became a crime, a murder –

that's the word for it, murder – but as long as only you can know, and no one else, there isn't any problem!

My mother's face was grey, the colour of death itself, and her fingers were knotted in the front of her dress as if she would crush it to a pulp in her hands.

'Yes,' she said, and she gasped out the words, 'it's what I would expect from you! Out of the slums! Dirty, miserable, without breeding like all the rest of them there in their stinking houses! Never even dreaming what respectability is!'

'Mother!' Bettina cried, but Matt cut her short.

'Respectability,' he said to my mother. 'I'll tell you what it is. It's not what other people think of you, but what you think of yourself! But there's a catch to it,' he said, turning suddenly to me. 'You have to be honest with yourself. Deep-down honest with yourself, Dick. You must understand that. It's the most important thing in the world to you right now that you understand that.'

'And there's Bob,' my father said to me. 'You can't let that boy go through hell. Even if they fail to make a case against him . . .'

'Harry,' my mother said, 'it's your son. Do you know what you're asking him to do?'

My father said helplessly, 'I'm asking him to do what's right. That's all. Only what's right.'

'Then I'll tell you something, Harry,' my mother said, and there seemed no life in her any more, 'if this comes out we're through. You've wanted that a long time, Harry, and if my son is made a public disgrace you'll have your chance. But there won't be anyone else waiting for you. You'll be all alone to think of what you made of yourself and of him. The day my son stands with handcuffs on and tells the world what he did, and why, that's the day I'm done with you. Done with both of you.'

'Lucille,' my father said, 'to talk about the boy like that!'

She flung out an arm toward him, and her face was twisted with pain. 'They say, like father like son,' she cried out, 'and you're a fit pair! All right, Harry, if that's the way you want it you know where I stand.'

I couldn't understand it, the way she was pulling away from me, the way she was leaving me there alone.

'But I went to see Miss Ballou because of you!' I said. 'I was doing it for you!'

She clapped a hand to her breast. 'Oh, I see!' she said. 'I understand now! Somehow, *I'm* to blame for everything! Somehow, it's all *my* fault!'

She had talked like that, used that tone of voice so many times before, but now it was the first time in my life I was really hearing it, really listening to the sound and the words and what they meant. But I didn't say anything. It was Bettina who looked at her and whispered, 'Yes, maybe it is,' and they stood facing each other like that. Then Bettina took my hand. 'Let's go downstairs, Dick,' she said. 'You can use the phone there.'

So we went downstairs, Bettina holding my hand like she did when we were kids crossing the street together, and my father and Matt behind me, and only my mother left there in the room watching us with her hand over her mouth, but never moving.

I had the phone in my hand like a dead thing waiting to come alive when I spoke into it, and then I saw Matt was at the front door, opening it. He was going to go away like that, his face all cut and bruised even with the blood washed off, and that little rag of shirt dirty and stained as it was. It was like having the big prop, the one I needed most, kicked from under me, and suddenly I felt I was all alone, and falling, and afraid.

'Matt!' I called. 'Matt! Don't go away!'

He stopped, but his hand was still on the door as he turned, not toward me, but toward Bettina. And then I saw

Bettina was standing there rigid, her hands tight against her sides, her head high, and she was looking at him.

‘Matt,’ she said, and she was crying. ‘Matt, don’t go away.’

And I knew he wouldn’t.



*Some recent Penguin crime
fiction is described on
the following pages*

MAIGRET AND THE OLD LADY

Simenon

1678

It suited Maigret to spend a few days by the sea in September, though Étretat, in Normandy, was just closing down for the winter. It recalled childhood to him – shrimping-nets, a toy train, men in flannels, beach umbrellas, and so on. Nothing serious could happen by the sea. Or could it?

Valentine Besson might be a dear old lady, as chirpy as a popular actress in the role of a marquise . . . but her maid, La Rose, had died in agony when she swallowed the mistress's sleeping-draught one Sunday night. It was packed with arsenic. What part had her daughter, Arlette, played, or her stepson, the deputy, or Theo, the perfect gentleman? Were La Rose's fisherman family involved? A glass of Calvados may mellow Maigret, but murder turns him tough.

'The best Simenon I have read for some time . . . A genuinely baffling puzzle' – Julian Symons in the *Sunday Times*.

NOT FOR SALE IN THE U.S.A. OR CANADA



INQUEST ON BOUVET

Simenon

1679

No doubt Maigret was on holiday when Monsieur Bouvet disconcerted everyone by falling dead as he was examining old prints at a bookseller's stall beside the Seine. 'One of our readers' – a smart young American tourist – snapped the body and sold the picture to a newspaper. And then the fun began. For people recognized the dead man.

Madame Jeanne, the concierge, knew very well that he was René Bouvet. It was her privilege to busy herself with the last rites. But Mrs Marsh swore he was her husband, Samuel. So the Commissioner of Paris Police HQ became involved and the venerable Monsieur Beaupère began inquiries 'on behalf of the families concerned'. At length Lucas, one of Maigret's inspectors, was deputed to find out exactly who Bouvet was, and an uncommon tale it proved to be.

NOT FOR SALE IN THE U.S.A. OR CANADA



MAIGRET HAS SCRUPLES

Simenon

1680

All the lags and lunatics of Paris call to see Maigret sooner or later – often just for a talk. Here's Xavier Marton, for instance. Just like a thousand other Parisians, you'd say. He sells toy electric trains in a big store. His wife's planning to murder him. Mad? Well, he'd been to consult Dr Steiner about that. Besides he'd found zinc phosphide in the broom cupboard. Then the wife, Gisèle, pays Maigret a call.

The textbooks on psychology don't help. Maigret's worried. But the Public Prosecutor won't authorize an investigation; there's been no crime. He must wait for 'fresh developments'. As Maigret slams the door, he asks himself; 'Who was to be the *fresh development*? Him or her?' He sets a watch.

'This astonishing writer at the top of his form' – *Daily Telegraph*.

NOT FOR SALE IN THE U.S.A. OR CANADA



MAIGRET AND THE RELUCTANT WITNESSES

Simenon

1681

This time everything seems to be against Maigret. His wife has just reminded him he's retiring in two years' time. Besides they've carted away that companionable old stove that used to warm his office . . . and it's November . . . and the world's full of smart young men.

Like Angelot, for instance, the new examining magistrate. Cold, detached, almost sardonic, he seems to be breathing down Maigret's neck in his keenness to study his 'methods'. And to crown it all, when Leonard Lachaume is found shot dead in bed at Ivry, the family call in their lawyer and as good as refuse to talk.

It needs all Maigret's patience and most of his inspectors to wrench the tawdry secrets from that mute world of dilapidated splendour which surrounds the Lachaumes, makers of petit-beurre biscuits that were once a household name.

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THE SOFT TALKERS

Margaret Millar

1693

Canadian-born Margaret Millar, who has been President of the Mystery Writers of America, is generally regarded as the natural successor to Agatha Christie. The dialogue is so lifelike, the situations are so credible, and the characters so recognizable that her books, as it were, 'read themselves'.

In *The Soft Talkers* the reader looks in on the lives of a set of wealthy Toronto business men. The wealthiest, Ron Galloway, has invited the 'fellows' to his lakeside hunting lodge for the week-end. But Galloway himself fails to arrive. Suspicion hardens into certainty that Galloway has made a cuckold of his best friend, Harry Bream, and Thelma Bream is expecting a child. Has Galloway cleared out, gone mad, committed suicide? And when this mystery is resolved, why shouldn't life return to normal again? For it cannot.

'She is in the very top rank of crime writers' - Julian Symons in the *Sunday Times*

'A final chapter that packs a knock-out punch' - *Daily Telegraph*

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Stanley Ellin has been described by a well-known critic as 'the most promising crime writer on either side of the Atlantic to appear during the 1950s'.

His characters assuredly *live*. Here, as it happens, they live in respectable Nicholas Street, Sutton – scarcely three hours' drive from New York City. In fact the Ayres are recognizable as an average American family in every detail.

And then the attractive woman next door, an artist from the big city, meets a brutal, sudden death. One by one the members of the family recount their stories to the plodding police chief, and one by one the author pitilessly strips down their characters. So intimately are they entangled in the case that any one might have killed Kate Ballou.

Brilliant narration and an artist's eye for human nature carry this crime story along no less than the passionate suspense in which the reader is held.

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